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ABSTRACT

This document contains the 11 issues of the newsletter "Rural Policy Matters" published in 2001. Issues examine recent educational research on small and rural schools; report on court litigation related to rural school finance, local advocacy efforts in support of rural schools, and the condition of rural school facilities; outline policy issues related to rural educational reform and funding; and describe publications and Web sites of interest. Articles include: "Nebraska Property Taxes: Who Suffers Most?"; "Parents Saying No to High Stakes Testing"; "Unequal and Inadequate: Funding Litigants Eyeing Facilities Issues"; "E-Rate Works Despite Hassles: Shift from FCC Could Mean Shaky Funding"; "Equal Facilities Funding in Alaska: Court Rules for Rural, Native Children"; "Vermont's Act 60 Improves Equity"; "It's a Rough Road Out There: Five State Study Documents Student Busing Experiences"; "Leveling Off and Zeroing Out: Budget Cuts Hit Facilities Programs"; "Lake View: The Little District That Could"; "Rural Education Finance Center Ready To Work"; "Teacher Recruitment and Retention: What Works in the Midwest"; "Ohio's DeRolph Decision: Complex and Controversial"; "The Puzzle of Rural Teacher Shortages"; "North Carolina's School Finance Case: A Victory for At-Risk Students--But Is More Money Needed?"; "Kids Can: Grady County Student Action"; "Building Community Leaders in West Virginia"; and "Lessons Learned from Ohio's Litigation Efforts." (SV)

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Rural Policy Matters: A Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action, 2001

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Rural School and Community Trust Policy Program

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Rural Policy Matters
RPM 3.1
January 2001
A Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action
www.ruraltrust.org

Nebraska Property Taxes
Who suffers most?

The heaviest property taxes in Nebraska are in rural, agricultural counties with the lowest per capita incomes, according to a new study by the Center for Rural Affairs, a non-profit organization and member of the Nebraska Rural Education Alliance.

Nebraska is home to the nation's three poorest counties. In fact, 7 of the 21 poorest counties in the country, measured by per capita income, are in Nebraska. And, in a state that relies a great deal on property taxes to fund schools, it is the residents of these counties who pay the heaviest property taxes. Using state, federal, and University of Nebraska data, researchers Jon Bailey and Kim Preston found that:

- The poorest counties in the state are agriculturally dependent counties. Among the poorest one-third of Nebraska's 93 counties, agricultural land represents 64.5% of the property tax base. In the wealthiest and middle one-third, farmland is only 16.7 and 46.7% of property values, respectively.
- In the poorest one-third of the counties, the farmland is less valuable, averaging only $213 per acre, compared to $435 and $642 per acre in the middle and wealthiest thirds.
- Property taxes paid in the poorest one-third of the counties amount to over 5.5% of total income in those counties, compared to 4.1% in the middle one-third and 3.2% in the wealthiest one-third. The average property tax burden for residents in the poorest counties consumes a share of their income that is 75% larger than in the wealthiest counties.
- This disparity is worse with respect to school property taxes. In the poorest counties, these school taxes consume 3.6% of total income, compared to 1.9% in the wealthiest one-third–almost double.

How bad does it get? In Loup County, which has the distinction of having the lowest average per capita income in the nation, over half of all personal income goes to pay local property taxes.

The study makes policy recommendations, including adoption of a "circuit breaker" that limits property taxes for both urban and rural households to a reasonable percentage of household income, available only to those with a modest income.

It is a real tribute to rural Nebraska communities that they maintain so many small schools in the face of a school finance system that depends so heavily on such inequitable taxing. They are under enormous pressure to close their schools, but many continue to stay open, typically producing high academic achievement and very high graduation rates.

The report, *Digging Deeper Into Shallow Pockets* is available at www.cfra.org, for free from Center for Rural Affairs, Box 406, Walthill, NE 68067, by emailing mariep@cfra.org, or by calling 402.846.5428.❖

If one were to look for a likely cause of the separation of the public and its schools, . . . then it would seem advisable to consider this historic trend toward larger schools and districts and the accompanying mass transportation of children out of their neighborhoods and communities to remotely located institutions.

From the report, *An Agenda for Studying Rural School Busing*, by Craig B. Howley and Charles R. Smith, recently published by AEL, Inc. and available on their web site at http://www.ael.org/rel/rural/abstract/howley-smith.htm.

Rural Trust Seeks Education Finance Director to Launch New Initiative

The Rural School & Community Trust (Rural Trust) is seeking a leader who wants to improve educational opportunities for rural children throughout the nation by changing the way states fund their schools. This person will lead efforts to launch a ***Rural Education Finance Center*** (REFC) as an operating unit of the Rural Trust's Policy Program.

For many rural schools, the primary barrier to more effective teaching, learning and school involvement in the life of a rural community, is a state funding system that starves them of equitable and adequate resources. For much of rural America, the primary education policy issue is whether the community is entitled to have a school. Under the financial circumstances in which many schools operate, the answer seems to be "no."

Rural schools can also learn from others about how to get the most out of the funding they receive. How do the schools that do well in adverse circumstances get so much from so little? The REFC will work on that question as well.

This is an area of public policy that is always fraught with conflict. Often, this issue pits those inside the school against those in the community, those who have children in school against those who do not. For many rural areas, especially those with a troubled or declining economic base, these divisions are exacerbated by state school finance systems that depend too heavily on local property taxes to fund schools. The

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Rural Trust Welcomes New Employees

The new year brings several new faces to the Rural Trust:

- Lynnette Harrison began her work as a field organizer for the Policy Program on January 1st. She will work closely with our field projects in building a stronger state and local constituency for rural schools. Harrison has worked most recently as director of the Louisiana Labor Neighbor Project and also provided support to Louisiana Communities United, focusing on parent involvement in schools in rural parishes, as well as on the state's high-stakes testing program.
- MaryBe McMillan joins us as State Policy Monitor. She lives in North Carolina, where she has been working as director of research for the Common Sense Foundation, authoring a major report on the state's accountability system and writing issue briefings on topics ranging from coastal development, to farm workers, to tax fairness. She recently received her Ph.D. in rural sociology at North Carolina State University. McMillan's work for the Rural Trust will be focused on design and analysis of state policy audits.
- Doris Terry Williams joins the Rural Trust as Director of Capacity Building on February 1. Filling a new position, Williams will supervise our Stewards program and oversee the documentation and assessment team at Harvard. She will also focus on art in rural education and teacher preparation. Williams has most recently served as Assistant Dean and Associate Professor of Education at North Carolina Central University in Durham, NC. Among her many achievements, Williams was the architect of a new teacher development emphasis at that university and has served 12 years on the school board of rural Warren County. She has also been a consultant to dozens of organizations, including the National Algebra Project. She has an M.Ed. and an Ed.D from North Carolina State in Adult and Continuing Education.❖

Finance Director

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REFC will focus attention on building community engagement in the cause of effective school finance. As is the case in all of our work, the focus will be on communities, on grassroots action and on solid information and analysis upon which to base policy judgements.

The new director will have to build this program from the ground up. She or he will design and implement a national program that will:

- Help rural people and organizations act as responsible and effective advocates working toward adequate and equitable funding of all public schools serving rural communities by providing technical assistance, information and research.
- Provide accurate information and competent support to rural people on current legal issues involving school finance systems.
- Sponsor rigorous scholarly research on school finance issues that are particularly pressing for rural schools and communities.
- Help rural school leaders to address cost factors related to efficient management of resources.
- Monitor and report on policy developments affecting rural school finance.

The director won't work alone. He or she will build a team of staff, consultants and institutional partners to launch the REFC, which will operate as a decentralized, lean and flexible unit that provides services in rural areas at the point of need. A small REFC office may be located somewhere that is convenient to the REFC Director, but no matter where the director locates, she or he will have to travel extensively in the United States.

The first task for the new director will be to develop and implement a three-year strategic plan for the REFC, including a research and advocacy strategy, a public education strategy, and where appropriate, a legislative and litigation strategy. This will require building and maintaining relationships with a wide range of interests, including grassroots rural groups, technical and professional people, researchers and policy-makers.

Naturally, the Rural Trust is looking for someone who is committed to adequate and equitable funding for rural K-12 education throughout the nation. A graduate degree in a relevant subject area, not necessarily education, is important, but equivalent practical experience can be a substitute for a degree. In any case, the director needs to be familiar with education finance issues, with rural issues in general, and with the tools and techniques of research, advocacy and litigation. Being able to communicate plainly about complex issues is crucial. This is not primarily a research position, but first and foremost an advocacy position.

For a complete job announcement see our web site at www.ruraledu.org/jobs.html.

Applicants should send a cover letter with a resume and a writing sample to Christine Damm at the Rural Trust Policy Program, P.O. Box 68 (2 So. Main St.), Randolph, VT 05060, by fax to 802.728.2011 or by email to policy.program@ruraledu.org.❖

Notes from Ohio

Editor's note: The Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy has been at the heart of the battle for better school funding in Ohio from the beginning and as this update from Ohio Rural Action indicates, that includes the issue of facilities. Contact the Coalition at www.ohiocoalition or 614.228.6540 or contact Rural Action at www.rural-action.org or 740.767.4938.

The following comments relative to your December 2000 article on "Ohio Finance Litigation" are designed to give your readers a more complete picture of the work currently taking place with regard to school facilities. The Coalition for Equity and Adequacy, which had its genesis in rural Southeast Ohio, has always had rural interests. The Coalition has played a leading role in laying the groundwork for making the process of working with the Ohio School

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Worth Waiting For? Federal Support for School Repair

There was a lot of interest in providing significant federal funding for new schools and renovations this year. The Appropriations Bill for Fiscal Year 2001 did not offer as much money as many had hoped to see, but rural school districts should consider how they might access what is available. How this money gets distributed is something to watch in your state.

What this isn't

It isn't the Johnson-Rangel School Modernization Bill, which would have provided no-interest loans for repairs, renovation and new construction with more generous funding over several years. Education Secretary Richard Riley praised Congress for passing the 2001 budget that increases funding for education by 18%. But regarding construction funds, he stated that he was "especially disappointed that the school renovation program was not funded to the Administration's request and suggested that passage of the Johnson-Rangel School Modernization Bill, which had 230 bipartisan co-sponsors in the Congress that just adjourned, should be enacted early in the new Congress." (See Secretary Riley's press release at http://www.ed.gov/PressReleases/12-2000/122100a.html).

What it is

The 2001 budget will fund $1.2 billion in "Urgent School Renovation Grants [to] provide support for emergency repairs, such as repair of roofs, plumbing, and electrical systems, and meeting fire and safety codes, and includes funding for special education services or technology-related construction activities and support for a new charter school facility financing pilot." The bill allocates "$75,000,000 for school renovations and repairs, as well as new construction activities in local educational agencies (LEA's) in which at least 50% of the student population lives on Native American or Native Alaskan lands," and "$25 million in credit enhancement for acquisition, renovation, or construction of public charter schools." (See details of the 2001 federal education budget at http://www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/budget.html).

The Department of Education notes that the allocation for "Urgent School Renovation provides $901 million in support for short-term emergency repairs, [and] $274 million in additional funding for IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) services or technology activities." The money will go to State Educational agencies (SEA's) based on Title 1, part A allocation formulas to be distributed to LEA's through "competitive grants for emergency school repair and renovation activities." Of these funds, 75% must go to LEA's in high poverty areas, which are defined as having 30% or greater child poverty or 10,000 or greater poor children.

Of great importance to rural people may be the clause stating, "the State educational agency or entity would also ensure that rural local educational agencies receive, in the aggregate, shares of the state allocation of Federal emergency repair and renovation funds that are proportionate to their share of Title 1, part A funds. Each state shall determine which local educational agencies within the state qualify as rural for the purposes of this program." LEA's that are eligible due to high poverty or rural status but are not funded will be eligible to compete for a "grant from the remaining repair and renovation funds." Private elementary and secondary schools with a child poverty rate of 40% or higher may also compete for grants.

Uses NOT Permitted

Funds may not be used for maintenance costs, construction of new facilities (except in an impacted LEA) or for "stadiums or other facilities primarily used for athletic contests or other events for which admission is charged to the general public."

Permitted Uses

School repair and renovation grants may be used for emergency repairs or renovation "only to ensure the health and safety of student and staff, including:

- repairing, replacing, or installing roofs, electrical wiring, plumbing systems, or sewage systems;
- repairing, replacing, or installing heating, ventilation, or air conditioning systems (including insulation); and bringing public schools into compliance with fire and safety codes. Making modifications necessary for accessibility, asbestos abatement or removal from public school facilities."

Although by all estimates, the need for repair, renovation, and new construction of school facilities in this country far exceeds the $1.2 billion allocated in the current federal budget, this money could make dangerous school buildings safer and correct some of the worst conditions that affect our children and their teachers each day they are in school. Eligible and interested rural districts should apply for funds as soon as possible.❖

Ohio Coalition

coninued from page 2

Facilities Commission and the design manual more appropriate for rural areas. Indeed, their April 2000 publication, "A Call to Build", outlines a number of steps with regards to state policy decisions; specific improvements in the facilities planning, design and construction process; responsiveness to local needs; and revision of the Ohio School Design Manual. Their recommendations provide the framework for Rural Action's current citizen-based approach to making Ohio's school facilities system work in the best interest of its rural areas.

—The Rural School and Community Organizing Project of Rural Action

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Matters of Fact

Tools for Neighborhood Schools

The National Trust for Historic Preservation's recent report "Historic Neighborhood Schools in the Age of Sprawl: Why Johnny Can't Walk to School" offers more evidence that removing schools from the communities they serve is a bad idea. The report makes a connection between sprawl and large, isolated school facilities, examines the public policies that discourage neighborhood schools, and offers strategies for keeping schools central to communities. For more information, visit www.nationaltrust.org or call Gary Kozel at 202.588.6013.

Georgia's Governor Barnes Seeks to Ease Teacher Shortage

Georgia Governor Roy Barnes will present the 2001 Legislature with a plan that includes $700 million in school construction money and seeks funding to help attract math and science teachers to rural Georgia schools. Barnes is proposing a six-week education training program to certify more non-teachers who have degrees in math and science.

Linking Rural Schools and Community Development

The Southwest Education Development Laboratory (SEDL) has developed a tool for helping forge a connection between rural schools and community development. "Thriving Together: Connecting Rural School Improvement and Community Development" is described as a workbook designed to help launch joint school-community development efforts. The book is available for a fee, in Spanish or English, from SEDL. For more information, visit www.sedl.org or call 800.476.6861.

Funds for Oregon's Rural Schools In Jeopardy

The $28 million in federal timber money earmarked for Oregon's rural schools is the subject of a heated debate between the state's rural and urban counties. Oregon's schools are funded based on the number of students they serve–local property taxes, federal timber payments and all other funds are distributed according to school enrollment. The $28 million was intended to go the rural counties that were losing revenue as a result of government cutbacks on timber. However, state law mandates that all schools share education revenues. Urban Portland, which has very little timberland but 10% of the state's students, would receive 10% of the money designated for rural schools. A bill is currently being proposed that would send the money exclusively to small rural districts, many of which are suffering from declining enrollment.❖

Rural Policy Matters

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Rural Policy Matters is published by the Rural School and Community Trust.

The Rural School and Community Trust seeks to understand complex issues affecting rural schools and communities; to inform the public debate over rural education policy; and to help rural communities act on education policy issues affecting them. Comments, questions, and contributions for *Rural Policy Matters* should be sent to:

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Rural Policy Matters
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Parents Saying No to High Stakes Testing

Seventy parents and community leaders from across North Carolina met in mid January to form *Parents United for Fair Testing*, beginning a campaign to alter the state's accountability system. More than half of the diverse group hailed from rural areas of the state, and included Native Americans from Robeson County, Hispanics from as far west as Wilkes County, as well as Caucasians and African Americans from every corner of the state. The meeting was sponsored by the North Carolina Justice Center's Rural Initiative Project.

North Carolina's accountability program includes rewards and sanctions for schools, teachers and students. This year the state requires that end of grade test scores of fifth graders be used to determine which students must attend remediation programs. If, after remediation, children continue to fail the test, they can be retained. Though state officials say that final decisions are up to the principal, the reality in districts already implementing the plan is that almost no students who fail the end of grade tests are promoted. Next year third and eight graders face the same demands.

The day began with stories of organizing in other southern states. Mickey Vanderwerker, who coordinates Parents Across Virginia United to Reform SOL's (PAVURSOL), shared their organizing techniques. Using everything from radio talk shows to contact cards in laundry mats, PAVURSOL has built a group of 5,000 activists. Helen Johnson, who works with the Mississippi Education Working Group, spoke about the need to have a vision of good education and to build accountable local organizations. One of the concerns about testing in Mississippi is that the poorest, rural districts have problems recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. Mississippi allows long-term substitutes with weak qualifications to fill positions. With marginal instruction, children may not be prepared to meet standards.

Galvanized by their children's stress and the lack of resources to help them succeed, North Carolina parents and community leaders spent the day plotting next steps. Although many participants agreed that standards and high expectations are important, they feel that lack of resources coupled with such high stakes is not going to improve the education of children in their communities.

At one table, Hispanic parents and community leaders from Wilkes County school district discussed the needs of Spanish speaking students in their rural communities. Wilkes County, the second largest in North Carolina, is a rural county of rolling hills bordered by the Blue Ridge Parkway. The district has 21 schools for 9,955 students spread to remote corners of the county. The system's Hispanic population has grown from 128 students in 1995 to 300 students in 1999.

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What English Language Learners Face in Testing

When English Language Learner (ELL) students enroll in a North Carolina school district, they are assessed for their English language proficiency in reading, listening and writing. If they assess as novice/low to intermediate/low, then they can be excluded from state testing for 12 months. A second assessment with the same results allows them another 12 months exemption. After that year, they must participate in the state testing program.

If a student is assessed at the intermediate/high level, he or she must participate in the state testing program, but may be excluded from the tests requiring written responses for up to two years. The definition of proficiency does not correlate with the demands of, say, eighth grade English, but offers descriptions of what the level means. For example, the intermediate/high level for Reading is: "Able to read simple printed materials within a familiar context. Can read uncomplicated prose on familiar subjects in frequently used sentence patterns. Some misunderstandings. Able to read the facts but cannot draw inferences." While this level of skill may be adequate for a third-grade test-taker, it is not adequate for an eight-grade test-taker. Nonetheless, that intermediate/high level eighth grader must take the state tests.❖

Getting the Message about Accountability

North Carolina policy makers may be hearing the distress of parents and community leaders over the state accountability program. The high school graduation test has been delayed from 2003 until 2005. State Superintendent Mike Ward has issued a plan for providing substantial extra resources to chronically low performing schools. Superintendent Ward's new initiative would provide dramatic cuts in class size, large bonuses for teachers to teach in low performing schools and a longer school day or school year. If a school continues to lag after two years, then sanctions could be used, including wholesale changes in faculty and administration.❖

Good Neighbors

Study Links Achievement with Connections

"People [from outside] don't know what neighborhoods are here. We know everybody on a first-name basis, but we don't live close by. I don't see many of my neighbors that often. The school is the only center of the community."

These words, spoken by the mother of a rural West Virginia kindergarten student, are what's at the heart of a new study on the effect that neighborhoods have on the academic achievement of rural students. In their study *Poor, Rural Neighborhoods and Early School Achievement* Marshall University researchers Robert Bickel, Cynthia Smith and Teresa Hardman Eagle set out to answer the question "Does the quality of rural neighborhoods affect the early academic achievement of the students who live there?" The answer, they find, is yes.

In the past, research done on the "neighborhood effect" has focused on urban and suburban neighborhoods, mainly because these fall into neater geographical boundaries than rural neighborhoods. Rural neighborhoods are assumed to have no impact unless they are in poor areas. Then they are assumed to have a negative impact on student learning. Many negative rural stereotypes come into play here especially in chronically poor areas like Appalachia–that the only values students get from their surroundings are amorality, social backwardness and the "culture of poverty." In the little research that has been done on rural neighborhoods, most researchers have determined that the neighborhood effect in rural areas has less to do with community than with the social class and income levels of residents.

According to Bickel, Smith and Eagle, the problem with previous research has been in the way rural neighborhoods have been defined. In rural areas, where the nearest neighbor can be a few miles away, it's not about how many houses are on the block. Instead, their study measures neighborhood as people perceive it. And in talking about neighborhood quality, they're not talking about how much the houses are worth or how many cars are in the garage. They're talking about the relationships that area residents have with each other–how safe they feel, how dependable their neighbors are and how friendly they are with each other.

Using data collected in two rural West Virginia counties, the authors were able to examine the impact that neighborhood has on early student achievement. They used data that had previously been collected during interviews with rural West Virginia residents to determine neighborhood quality. Data were then collected for 292 randomly selected kindergarten students entering twelve different elementary schools in 1992 and 1993. The kids in the dataset lived in families where the average income was $10,800. Just over 75% of their parents were high school graduates or had GEDs. Nine percent of the students were African American and all of the rest were Caucasian. Students were given three tests–an oral vocabulary/verbal ability test, a letter-word identification achievement test and a problem solving ability test–in the Fall, as they entered kindergarten, and once again in the Spring, at the end of the school year.

Bickel, Smith, and Eagle analyzed the students' test scores to see if they could find a relationship between achievement and neighborhood quality. What they found was that the students who went to school with children from higher quality neighborhoods had higher test scores and that students who went to school with children from lower quality neighborhoods had lower test scores–regardless of their race, family income, parents' education level, or parenting skill levels. In other words, rural neighborhoods *do* have an impact on early student achievement. The authors think that if students live in high quality neighborhoods–even if the neighborhood is poor and rural–what they bring to school with them is a sense of security, safety, and social cohesion. It is that sense that provides rural students with a hopeful environment for learning.

The implications of this study are clear–that neighborhoods play an important role in the academic achievement of rural students. Community counts.

What does this mean, then, for communities that have lost or are losing their schools to consolidation? What happens to the neighborhood when there is no longer a neighborhood school? The authors point out that, while neighborhood schools may be disappearing, neighborhoods themselves are not. Rural students from strong neighborhoods will continue to benefit from the connections they have to their communities.❖

Join the School-Community Facilities Network

Responding to needs raised by our many contacts working in the school design and facilities policy fields, the Rural Trust has launched a school-community facilities network. As the host, we will provide useful information tools, successful examples and a way to share experiences. We hope to make a productive national gathering space for anyone concerned with making improvements in facilities conditions or integrating schools into the lives of communities. The network hosts an electronic mailing list for focused discussion and information sharing and is assembling an array of resources tailored to the needs of rural school facilities activists.

Like any network, it will take people like you from across the country to make it successful. Please share this announcement with others. To get involved, you may visit the expanded facilities section of our website www.ruraledu.org/facilities.html or contact the network coordinator, Barbara Lawrence, by email to barbara.lawrence@ruraledu.org or by calling her (from 9 to 6 EST) at 617.547.3666.❖

Renovating Schools: *Love 'em or leave 'em*

In some places people treasure their older schools, and in others the school boards can't seem to get kids out the door fast enough. Policies promoting consolidation, new construction over renovation and requirements for large amounts of acreage that force schools out of neighborhoods still prevail in some districts. In others, however, community leaders and policy-makers have realized that "newer" is not necessarily better. In fact, in the right circumstances, well maintained or renovated older buildings can offer a superior learning environment while promoting community cohesion for the same or lower costs.

Unfortunately, policy in some states still favors new construction. For example, as mentioned in *Historic Neighborhoods in the Age of Sprawl, Why Johnny Can't Walk to School* from the National Trust for Historic Preservation (National Trust), Ohio requires that "if the cost of renovating a school exceeds two-thirds of the costs of building a new one, the school district should build new." Massachusetts has applied a 50% rule; Minnesota, a 60% rule; Washington State; an 80% rule. In Arkansas, as a "rule of thumb," if the cost of renovation exceeds 50% of new construction and the existing building is older than 50 years, state officials recommend building a new facility. Other states, like Arizona and Georgia, permit renovation only once, and Pennsylvania limits renovation projects to one every twenty years. The National Trust further points out that, "As recently as 1997, historic schools in Georgia were ineligible for state funds because they were presumed to be obsolete."

States that don't fund capital expenses, leaving construction and renovation costs on the shoulders of districts and communities, do not impose such requirements. However, school board members and administrators may think that renovation is a poor investment because they don't recognize the value of the existing structure and infrastructure and they don't accurately estimate costs of new construction. As the National Trust's *Community Guide to Saving Older Schools* points out, the "hidden costs" of new facilities can include significant expenses such as "water and sewer line extensions, student transportation, and road work." Savings that could be gained by continuing to use existing services and by capturing the value of keeping the shell of a facility and rebuilding the interior are often omitted from the equation when school boards consider renovation and new construction. School planners may also ignore the fact that school buildings were usually better constructed before 1950 than after, and that there is significant historic and social value as well as aesthetic appeal in older schools for the communities they serve.

Several states have changed their approach to renovation making it easier for communities to save older schools save taxpayers' money, and protect the value of these buildings as centers of community. Consider these examples:

Maine

Maine has shown the way (the Dirigo State's motto is "I lead") to encourage good planning of school facilities by interdepartmental coordination of the State Planning Office and the Department of Education. A new Revolving Renovation Fund proposed by Governor Angus King and funded by the legislature with $28 million for July 2000-June 2001 allows districts to borrow from the state to pay for renovations. The state automatically forgives 30% to 70% of a school's loan and requires the rest to be paid back within five to ten years. Officials in Maine say 60 to 70% of the state funds for facilities are now going into renovation.

In Belfast, Maine, for example, after four years of debate, the school board recently voted 14-1 to renovate and enlarge the two oldest schools in the town, Peirce and Anderson. The community was determined to save these neighborhood schools and to override objections from the Superintendent. They hired an architect who showed that it was both possible and cost-effective to renovate rather than build new. Given need, the value the community placed on these schools, and the new state policy on renovation, the Maine State Department of Education ranked Peirce and Anderson 14th on the list of schools eligible for state funding.

Vermont

In 1997 Vermont adopted the following policy: "It is . . . in the public interest to protect Vermont's historic schools for future generations and it shall be the policy of the Vermont State Board of Education that: School districts be encouraged to use the existing infrastructure to meet the needs of Vermont's students and therefore funding for renovations, including major repairs, and additions to existing school buildings shall be given preference over new school developments, taking into consideration the educational needs of students and that the costs of rehabilitation do not unreasonably exceed the costs of such new developments."

Maryland

Maryland has made a fine start in eliminating funding formulas that discriminate against older schools. The National Trust reports that 84% of Maryland's funds for capital projects go to renovation and that the "Smart Growth Program encourages schools as well as other public institutions to reinvest in exiting communities before building new in outlying areas."

For more information please visit the facilities section of our website at www.ruraledu.org/facilities.html.❖

New ERIC digests look at standards, school size

- *"World-Class Standards" and Local Pedagogies: Can We Do Both?* by Thomas J. Gibbs and Aimee Howley
- *Research about School Size and School Performance in Impoverished Communities* by Craig Howley, Marty Strange, and Robert Bickel

Both available at www.ael.org/eric or call 800.624.9120.❖

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High Stakes

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The district has six teachers working with the 226 students who qualify for services. These teachers are certified in some aspect of teaching and hold English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement, but none of them is fluent in Spanish, which is a concern for advocates. Four of the teachers are placed full time in the four schools with highest concentrations of English Language Learner (ELL) children; the other two serve the remaining 13 schools which house children who are eligible for services. The amount of time they spend traveling to each school eats into instructional time. And turnover is high; all six teachers were hired at the beginning of this school year.

Meeting participants Ada Jones, a Spanish teacher in Wilkes County, and Tony Marin, director of Centro Latino, are concerned that ELL students are required to take the state mandated tests after only 24 months in the system. Jones and Marin are hopeful that Parents United for Fair Testing will provide an outlet for them to express these concerns to state policy makers. Asked how he got involved in a statewide effort when he lives in a remote part of the state, Marin laughed and said, "All I really know how to do is make cheese." He recounted his years of working for Kraft Foods in Venezuela prior to his marriage to a US citizen from North Carolina. Marin now has a degree in Adult Education. He is a natural advocate spending his days helping Spanish speaking people get loans, seek medical care, and negotiate with the schools. When the Justice Center invited him to join their effort, Marin jumped at the chance. "It gave me the opportunity to become a more informed advocate and to link with other people across the state who are having the same struggles."

Parental concerns about standards and testing are growing across the nation. To find out about the issue in your state, visit ***The National Center for Fair & Open Testing****, www.fairtest.org, to search their* list of state coordinators and learn *about the Assessment Reform Network. Contact Karen Hartke at khartke@...rste...d or call 617.864.4810.* ***NC Justice Center****: www.ncjustice.org, call Greg Malhoit at 919.856.2150 or email greg@ncjustice.org.* ***Mississippi Education Working Group****, call Helen Johnson at 662.834.0089 or email cqe@tecinfo.com.* ***PAVURSOL****, www.SOLreform.com, call Mickey Vanderwerker at 540.586.6149, or email WMZEMKA@aol.com.*❖

The National Center for Children in Poverty's 2000 edition of *Map and Track: State Initiatives for Young Children and Families*. Is available at http://cpmcnet.columbia.edu/dept/nccp/ or call 212.304.7100.❖

Rural Policy Matters

RPM 3.2 **February 2001**

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Rural Policy Matters
RPM 3.3
March 2001
Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action
www.ruraledu.org

Unequal and Inadequate

Funding Litigants Eyeing Facilities Issues

Could a challenge to the adequacy of school facilities for rural areas under a state constitution education clause provide a second bite at the apple in states that have already upheld the constitutionality of k-12 school finance systems?

Perhaps.

School funding litigation dates back at least to the 1960's. Simply put, the problem is that most states rely mainly on the local property tax to fund schools. Since property tax values vary between districts, some districts benefit from high tax revenue, while others suffer. Unless a state is willing to equalize school revenue, or at least provide additional revenue, property-poor districts are shortchanged. Property in rural areas generally has less value and so these areas lack the tax base of their more metropolitan counterparts. The result is unequal tax revenue between rural and non-rural areas.

The early efforts to address unequal and inadequate school funding in the courts culminated in the United States Supreme Court's decision in San Antonio Independent. School District v. Rodriquez, (1973). The Court held that under the United States Constitution, low property wealth school districts were not entitled to more money from the state to equalize funding among districts. The Court essentially said that the Equal Protection Clause in the United States Constitution did not protect property-poor districts from inequities in state school funding systems.

Since 1973, most claimants have looked to state constitutions for relief from unequal and inadequate funding systems. Nearly every state has seen litigation challenging the adequacy and/or equity of state funding systems under state education or equal protection clauses. Every state in the nation (with the possible exception of Mississippi) has a clause in its constitution that makes the state responsible in some way for educating children. At least 17 states have ruled in favor of plaintiffs who have sought to declare their state systems unconstitutional, usually on the basis of language in the education clause, and usually by attacking the adequacy rather than the equity of school funding resources.

But, in the majority of the litigated cases, state supreme courts have upheld the constitutionality of the state funding system. These rulings have not put an end to litigation, however. At least a dozen states have seen subsequent litigation after the plaintiff lost the initial constitutional challenge.

At least one commentator suggested last year that the next major issue for school funding litigation may be facilities funding. Although good numbers are hard to come by on the full extent of the problem, one recent survey estimated it would cost $127 billion to make the nation's schools fit for student learning. Not surprisingly, rural and poor districts are most likely to have problems in their buildings.

Consequently, based on these significant unmet needs, last year's commentator may be proven correct, particularly in states that have previously ruled against plaintiffs seeking equity or adequacy in funding. Even the most dispassionate and analytical judge will have trouble ignoring the claims of low-wealth districts, given the poor condition of school facilities in those places. You can't hide crumbling buildings and you can't shift the blame for their condition to students and teachers.

Two facilities cases that deserve a closer look for activists interested in rural school finance reform are *Idaho Schools for Equal Educational Opportunity v. Idaho*, in Idaho (1999) and *Roosevelt Elementary School District No. 66 v. Bishop*, in Arizona (1994). Prior to these cases, the state supreme courts in both states had upheld the constitutionality of the public school finance system against claims that the systems failed to provide equal resources.

In the subsequent cases concerning the adequacy of school facilities, the courts followed one of two tracks. Either they overturned the system, as in the *Roosevelt* case, or they sent the case back to the trial court for further proceedings on the grounds that the state had a responsibility to at least provide minimally adequate facilities—the finding in the *Idaho Schools* case.

Despite the narrowness of the holding in the *Idaho Schools* case, the

continued on page 2

Vermont Equity Report Available

The Rural Trust recently released a report on Vermont's Equal Educational Opportunity Act of 1997, or Act 60. Act 60 was designed to rectify educational inequities that were the basis of the Supreme Court ruling that declared the state's foundation formula unconstitutional. The new report, *A Reasonably Equal Share: Educational Equity in Vermont, A Status Report—Year 2000-2001*, examines the degree to which Act 60 has improved inequitable conditions from previous years and the degree to which inequities still remain. The report is available on our website at http://www.ruraledu.org/vt_equity.html or by calling the policy program office at 802.728.5899.

Unequal

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outcome may be significant to those interested in improving funding for rural school buildings. The case shows that even in a state that has slammed the door on equitable funding, there is still a limit to the neglect the court will permit the legislature, at least when it comes to funding school facilities.

In Arizona, on the other hand, the *Roosevelt* decision appears to stand for the proposition that a "uniform" system does not have to be equal, but it does have to be adequate and the state system must not itself be the cause of gross disparities in funding. In Arizona, where 45% of the revenue for schools depended on property values, the system itself caused the disparity in facilities between districts, in the opinion of the Arizona court.

So, even if your state supreme court has denied an claim based on an equity argument, if your facilities are in deplorable condition, it's worth looking again at the language of the education clause in your state constitution. Determine whether there are gross disparities in the amount of funding available for facilities, and if so, whether the disparities are the result of the state's financing scheme. If those conditions are met, the *Roosevelt* decision may be a persuasive authority in your state—not something the court would have to follow, but something the court may be willing to follow. Also determine whether your facilities are "safe" and "conducive" to learning. Even if your state's court will not follow the *Roosevelt* decision and decide to support an adequate, if unequal, funding system, you may still find that the *Idaho Schools* decision could provide a way to get more funding to poor districts with deplorable buildings and facilities.

Litigation should not be looked at as a panacea for school funding problems. You may win the case, but lose the war because the state legislature provides a fix that, while constitutional, is not in the best interest of many local communities. But, where facilities litigation is being contemplated, these cases may be helpful to your cause. (specific case references are available)◆

Matters of Fact

Tracking state policy online

Two online databases are available to enable users to track state policy. The Achieve Standards Database (at www.achieve.org) is a searchable database of state and international academic standards in English language arts, mathematics, science and social studies, organized by subject, state, grade level, topic and keyword. The National Center for Children in Poverty has just released their 2000 edition of *Map and Track: State Initiatives for Young Children and Families. Map and Track* (at http://cpmcnet.columbia.edu/dept/nccp/mt00text.html) profiles state efforts to promote family economic security, specifically through refundable tax credits, state minimum wage laws, child care subsidies, health insurance and food and nutrition benefits.

Alaska looks at rural/urban school funding disparities

In Alaska, the state education department is seeking to change the funding formula that allocates state money to local school districts. In 1998, the legislature adjusted the distribution formula to direct more money to urban districts. The revamped formula was designed to allocate less money per new student to some rural districts. Now Gov. Tony Knowles and Education Commissioner Shirley Holloway are asking for a repeal of the 1998 formula adjustment and are recommending that actual school costs—as opposed to what districts pay—be measured.

New e-publication: *Small Community Quarterly*

The National Center for Small Communities has started publishing a free electronic newsletter called the *Small Community Quarterly*. The Winter 2001 *Quarterly* includes articles on new tools for community planning, smart growth for counties with dwindling populations, and a recent report on youth workforce development. To find out more about the *Quarterly*, visit http://www.natat.org/ncsc.

Fixing Idaho's rural school buildings

The 15 Idaho school districts who brought a case against the state to seek financial aid to repair schools have gotten a decision—sort of. Judge Deborah Bail ruled that the state's system of relying on local property tax bonds to pay for school building improvements does not meet the constitutional mandate that the state provide a "thorough system of education" for the poorest districts. She recommended, but did not order, that the Legislature find a solution. The plaintiffs had also requested that the state conduct a survey of pre-1960 built buildings and come up with a list of buildings that should be condemned, but Judge Bail did not include that in her ruling.

Narrowing Tennessee's teacher pay gap

Since a 1995 State Supreme Court ruling that students are entitled to equal educational opportunities regardless of where they live, Tennessee has been seeking ways to narrow the salary gap between urban and rural teachers. A new plan, developed by a committee for the state's Basic Education Plan (BEP), would raise the average teacher salary from $26,000 per year to $38,564 per year. The BEP plan would cost $406 million and would most likely require a tax increase, especially in light of Tennessee's projected $129 million budget shortfall. The plan would tie the state's share of teacher salaries to the average teacher pay in the Southeast. The Metro school system has intervened and opposed the plan, saying that students in many rural schools are actually receiving higher quality education than their urban counterparts.

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Let us hear from you! Send us your horror stories, successes, working strategies and new research findings. Write or call the Policy Program.

E-Rate Works Despite Hassles

Shift from FCC Could Mean Shaky Funding

New federal plans may make it more difficult for small rural schools and districts to take advantage of the telecommunications discounts offered by the E-rate program at the same time that the program has been shown to be effective in bringing more schools into the information age.

In 1994, 35% of rural schools and 30% of schools with fewer than 300 students were connected to the Internet. Three percent of rural classrooms had Internet access. By 1999, 96% of both rural schools and schools with fewer than 300 students were connected. Seventy-one percent of rural classrooms had Internet access. What happened in the interim that enabled rural schools to get on the information superhighway? Congress enacted the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the E-rate was born.

The E-rate, or education rate, is a program that has provided discounts on telecommunications services to tens of thousands of schools and libraries across the country. The program is funded by the Universal Service Fund, which was started in the 1930's to bring telephone services to rural areas, and which is currently supported by all telecommunications providers through surcharges on customer telephone bills. In fact, the philosophy of universal service dates to the earliest days of our republic, when Benjamin Franklin and others insisted on establishing equal postal rates and services everywhere in the young nation.

While every school is eligible for E-rate discounts, the fund provides larger discounts for rural schools and schools with high poverty rates. In general, the discounts are based on the number of students in poverty, which is determined by the number of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunches. Because telecommunications costs are higher in rural areas, the E-rate formula also kicks in a higher discount for rural schools. Schools that have 50 to 74% of free lunch-eligible students get 80% discounts on telecommunications services, schools with 75 to 100% of free lunch-eligible students get 90% discounts.

This targeting appears to be working. In the second year of the E-rate, 79% of rural and small town schools with more than three-quarters of free lunch-eligible students applied for funding. Wealthier schools have also been eager to take advantage of E-rate benefits—81% of rural and small town schools with less than one-fourth of their students eligible for free and reduced price lunch also applied for discounts. Still, since the E-rate was enacted, 70% of funds have gone to schools where more than half of the students were free or reduced price lunch-eligible.

Last year, *Education Week* reported that smaller districts were less likely to apply for discounts than were larger districts. Ninety-seven percent of districts with at least 25,000 students applied for discounts in the program's first year, compared to 77% of districts with fewer than 3,000 students. It follows, then, that urban districts get more E-rate funding than rural districts—even though one-third of US students attend city schools, half of the funding went to central city districts in 1999.

It's not that the E-rate is designed to give preference to large, urban schools and districts. What's happening is that rural schools are facing a very familiar obstacle—they simply lack the time and personnel to navigate the E-rate application process. School administrators, urban and rural alike, have been frustrated by the complicated application process. Just as with many other competitive or entitlement funding programs, many small, rural schools and districts can't handle the paperwork burden and the multi-step process.

There are solutions, though. First and foremost, the Universal Service Administrative Co., which runs the fund, needs to find ways to streamline the application process. In the meantime, independent contractors have set up shop to help schools and districts with the process. Websites like www.e-ratecentral.com offer assistance and resources. Some states, like Arkansas, Maine, New York, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, have established resource centers and "E-rate teams."

The hassle of the application process notwithstanding, there is no question that the E-rate is working. In the program's first two years, schools and libraries received $3.66 billion in discounts and one million classrooms were connected to the Internet. Yet despite this success, the future of the E-rate is uncertain.

Changes ahead?

President Bush had originally proposed moving the E-rate from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to the Department of Education and distributing funds through block grants to states. This would threaten one of the factors that has enabled the program to provide such significant discounts to so many schools. As a program of the FCC, the E-rate is directly linked to its ongoing funding source. If it were moved to the Department of Education, the E-rate would become subject to the congressional appropriations process. In other words, the amount of money would be decided on a yearly basis and would be subject to political whims. And while the E-rate has provided schools and libraries with innumerable educational opportunities, it is not itself an education program. It is a telecommunications program with a goal of providing service and access to those in need.

Recent reports (*TechDaily*, March 7, 2001) that the administration has at least temporarily dropped their plans to shift the E-rate to the Department of Education are encouraging. Secretary of Education Rod Paige testified before the House Education and Workforce Committee stating that, "Our current thinking is that the e-rate will not be consolidated into

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Matters of Fact

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New data on rural poverty and demographics

A recent issue of the USDA's *Rural Conditions and Trends* has several reports on rural poverty and demographics. The lead article reports that, while socioeconomic conditions in rural America continue to be favorable, not everyone is benefiting. It notes that 27% of rural workers, most of them women and minorities, worked in low-wage jobs in 1999. The low-wage jobs tended to be clustered in the Great Plains and the South. Other articles include a look at the drop in the non-metropolitan growth rate, a look at the poverty-level wages of hired farmworkers, and a look at the housing challenges of rural low-income workers. For more information, visit http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/rcat/rcat112/ or call Robert Gibbs at 202.694.5423.◆

E-rate

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other technology programs." E-rate advocates remain wary. The program is too valuable to schools to get lost in the din of politics as usual. For schools to maintain the successes they've achieved through the program, it is critical that the E-rate stay under the jurisdiction of the FCC. Rural schools in particular can't afford to lose it.

E-rate Resources

For more information on the E-rate, visit the following sites:

- *Education Week*'s special report on the E-rate (9/20/2000)http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=03eratermain.h20
- The Education and Library Networks Coalition (EdLINC) www.edlinc.org
- USAC Schools & Libraries Program, with E-rate state and national data http://www.sl.universalservice.org or call 888.203.8100 for more information
- The Maine School and Library E-rate page, with links to other E-rate sites http://www.state.me.us/msl/erate.htm◆

Where Has All the Rural Gone?

Topper Sherwood analyzes federal support for rural education research in his new report for the Rural Trust: *Where Has All the 'Rural' Gone? Rural Education Research and Federal Spending.* The report is available on our website at http://www.ruraledu.edu/policy.html or by contacting the Policy Program at 802.728.5899.◆

Rural Policy Matters

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RPM 3.4

Rural Policy Matters

April 2001 — A Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action — www.ruraledu.org

Equal Facilities Funding in Alaska

Court Rules for Rural, Native Children

Most of us in the "lower 48 states" have heard about the Iditarod, Alaska's grueling dogsled race across some of the most starkly beautiful and demanding landscape in the world. We admire the sheer toughness–physical and mental–of the people who compete in that race. Can anyone be tougher?

Maybe the children who go to school where the Iditarod is run.

For this daunting race winds through the Iditarod School District, then through the Lower Kuskokwim, Lower Yukon, and Bering Straits School Districts, all serving mainly Native Alaskan villages.

For the school children here, what makes life hard is not the conditions of the place they call home, tough as it is. The real harshness comes from a state government that denies them equal educational opportunity by sending them to schools which a state court found had "roofs falling in, no drinkable water, sewage backing up, and enrollment up to 187% of capacity.

A lawsuit challenging the Alaska system of funding school facilities (Kasayulie vs State of Alaska) was filed several years ago by parents and school districts which banded together to form Citizens for the Educational Advancement of Alaska's Children.

In 1999, Superior Court Judge John Reese ruled that the system indeed deprives rural children of state constitutional rights and violates federal laws against racial discrimination. Last month, Judge Reese reaffirmed the ruling–in stronger terms–in response to the state's request that he reopen the case and change his mind.

A Dual, and Discriminatory System

In Alaska, two systems are used to fund school facilities. The state will reimburse 70% of any bond issued by a local school district for school capital improvement. There is no limitation on how many bonds can be covered by this program in any year–it is an "entitlement" due to each district that chooses to approve a bond.

There is also a "capital improvement program" (CIP) offering grants on a competitive basis according to priority needs. This program is limited by the amount of money the legislature chooses to appropriate each year.

Now, two crucial facts:
Because Alaska's rural education attendance areas, like Iditarod, are not part of incorporated municipalities or borough, they can't issue bonds and they don't qualify for the bond reimbursement program.

At the time of the court's first ruling, the legislature had never appropriated funds for the CIP. So there also were no grant funds available for the rural districts.

The result is a rural school setting in which the court found appalling learning conditions. Even worse, the court noted, some rural schools had been at the top of the priority list for years without receiving any funding for capital improvements.

In all, the Court found in 1999 that:

- ***The state is violating the state constitution's education clause*** because "facilities funding is an integral part of education" and "inseparable" from the state's obligation to provide a school system "open to all children of the state."

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Vermont's Act 60 Improves Equity

Something quite amazing is happening in the rural and poor community of Lowell, Vermont. In the past three years, students made remarkable gains in academic performance at the small, k-8 school, Lowell Village School.

In 1997, test results classified Lowell as one of the lowest performing schools in Vermont. Last year, they were above the state average in every area. In 1997, for example, none of the fourth grade students met or exceeded state standards in writing effectiveness. Three years later, all of the students met or exceeded the standards in this area.

What accounts for this positive change? Though it is unlikely that any one factor is responsible for this very dramatic improvement in student achievement, it *is* probable that increased funding, dictated by Vermont's Act 60, played a significant role.

Act 60 mandates a minimum level of spending per pupil. Accordingly Lowell now spends over $2,000 more per pupil than it did before the Act took effect. Most of the additional funding in Lowell has gone for focused, on-going professional development. In addition, class size has significantly decreased with the addition of several more classroom teachers. Lowell has also invested in more administrative time, computers and support staff.

A recent research study on the impact of Act 60, released last month by the Rural School and Community Trust, suggests that this kind of success story is being repeated in many small towns throughout Vermont. The report, *A Reasonably Equal Share: Educational Equity in Vermont,* looked at statewide data to

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Act 60

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see to what extent Act 60 is improving equity for schools, for taxpayers and for students.

"Our conclusion is that Vermont is on the right course in the way it funds its schools," said Lorna Jimerson, Ed. D., a researcher on the Rural Trust policy staff, who compiled the report. "Inequities are diminishing, but local control has not been abandoned. Tax burdens are more appropriately related to income. More children are performing better on statewide assessments. These changes have not been without pain, but they have been for the better."

The study examines three areas of equity: "Spending Equity", "Tax Burden Equity," and "Student Achievement Equity."

Spending Equity. Prior to Act 60, huge disparities existed between property-poor and property-wealthy towns in the amount of money spent on education. Poor communities, frequently the most remote and rural, often needed to levy very high taxes to raise even the bare minimum for their local schools. Property-wealthy communities could enjoy low tax rates and be able to raise a great deal more.

The study shows that after three years, Act 60 has made significant gains in increasing spending equity. The wealthiest towns still spend more than the poorest towns—but the gap is much smaller.

Tax Burden Equity. Before Act 60, the poorest citizens were paying the highest percent of their income to support education. The wealthiest citizens were paying the least. Act 60 has significantly improved this situation. The lowest-income households now pay the least percentage of their income for school tax.

Student Achievement. Both before and after Act 60, notable inequities in student achievement were easy to find. Students residing in wealthy towns tend to do better academically than those residing in poor communities. Students residing in towns that spend more per pupil tend to do better academically.

Act 60, however, has *significantly narrowed* this achievement gap. (See the graphs below.) The achievement differences between students from poorer communities and those from wealthier communities have diminished. Similarly, the gap has decreased between the lowest and highest spending towns.

The study also indicates that academic achievement, in general, has improved over the past three years, with more students meeting or exceeding state standards, in all towns regardless of property wealth.

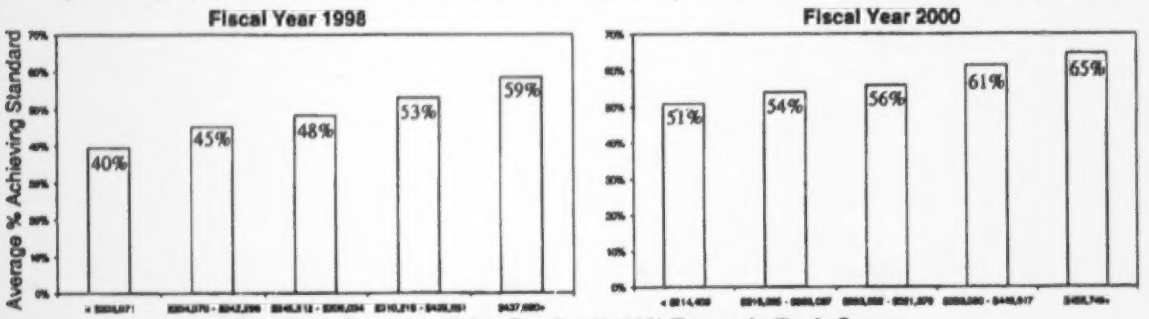
In general, the study reveals that Act 60 has greatly improved past inequities in Vermont. This is particularly encouraging for rural communities through out the country, since the smallest, most rural schools are frequently least likely to be provided equitable funding.

For the sake of all the Lowell Village Schools in rural communities around the country, the Rural Trust will continue to monitor the impact of Act 60 and other state funding formulas. As education finance expert Lawrence O. Picus stated in *The New York Times* (1/31/01), Vermont's Act 60 "has the potential to be the most equitable system in the country."

The entire report is available on the Rural Trust website, www. ruraledu. org.◆

Academic Achievement and Property Wealth in Vermont

Compare the two graphs below to see academic achievement for various levels of property wealth in Vermont's public schools in fiscal years 1998 and 2000. Achievement was measured using the average percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standards on Grade 4 New Standards Reference Exams.



Equalized Property Value Per Pupil: 20% Towns in Each Group

ECS looks at rural education issues

The Education Commission of thes States' Winter 2001 edition of *State Education Leader* is focused on rural education. The publication gives a rural perspective on several topics, including distance education, special education, community colleges, and service learning. For more information, visit http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/24/10/2410.htm or call the ECS Communications Department at 303.296.8332.◆

Funding in Alaska

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- ***The state denies rural schools "substantially equal access to capital funds" in violation of the state constitution's equal protection clause.*** The state had argued that it was only able to solve one problem at a time, and that it would provide rural access to funding once urban needs are met. The court said, "There is absolutely no evidence for this proposition."
- ***Equal protection is required in this case because education is a fundamental right under the Alaska constitution.*** The state argued that it was not a matter of rights. It was merely granting a benefit to the urban schools, not denying a benefit to the rural ones. But the judge ruled: "This argument fails. Education is not a benefit, it is a constitutional right."
- ***The state has no compelling interest in establishing a system of facilities funding that denies equal protection,*** despite the state's argument that its dual system of funding is intended to provide an incentive for the rural areas to incorporate, so that they might issue bonds to help finance their own schools. The court rejected this argument, noting that the property value in these areas was often too low to support repayment of bonds, and that there were other ways to accomplish this objective if that was what the state wanted to do.
- ***The unequal access to facilities funding is so closely correlated to the racial composition of the school districts that it has a discriminatory effect in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.*** The court noted that while 82% of the children in rural schools are Native Alaskans (and in many, as much as 99%), only 37. 3% of the children in city schools and 15. 4% of those in borough schools are Native. The Anchorage and Fairbanks schools, which get the most funding for facilities, have only 10% Native children.

"New Evidence," Says the State

In asking to reopen the case this year, the state argued that it had failed to give Judge Reese all the information he needed, especially about how much it did spend on rural schools. After reviewing the new evidence, Judge Reese as much as told them they would have been better off to keep still.

The new information merely confirmed that in the six fiscal years previous to the court's order, the state spent about half as much per pupil on rural schools as urban, despite higher construction and maintenance costs in rural areas, and that in four of the six years it spent $30 or less per pupil on rural facilities, about 4% of the average annual per pupil spending for urban schools.

In the most recent fiscal year, the state has beefed up spending on rural facilities, due largely to pressure from the 1999 court ruling. But Judge Reese noted that this political decision did not alter the "flawed dual funding system" that assured urban districts automatic reimbursement for 70% of the bonds they issue, while leaving rural districts dependent on "whatever the legislature chooses to give them," which he wrote, has been "arbitrary, inadequate, and racially discriminatory."

"Education health and safety of our youth have suffered. The dignity of our fellow citizens has suffered. The respect for public officials has suffered. The racial divisions in our state are further aggravated," the judge wrote. He said the fundamental legislative mistake was failure to understand this point: "We are constitutionally required to provide education on a substantially equal basis to all children, including rural mostly Native children, even if it costs more in the rural area."

This time, the judge left little doubt his patience was wearing thin. He said that if the legislature does not act to remedy the situation, he had the power to order specific "remedial action." He would do so, he said, "with great reluctance."

The case is on appeal to the state Supreme Court.◆

Matters of Fact

Missing the connection between schools and communities

A recently published study by the group Public Agenda finds that there is a disconnect between schools and communities. According to the report "Just Waiting to be Asked: A Fresh Look at Attitudes on Public Engagement," 70% of teachers surveyed said that they were not included in setting school policy. 62% of superintendents and 69% of school board members surveyed said that school board meetings tend to be dominated by people with special interests and agendas. At the same time, 73% of superintendents and 74% of school board members said they would like to see more community involvement in public schools. For more information, visit www.publicagenda. org or call Public Agenda's publications department at 212 686-6610, ext. 45.

Testing rural readers

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has released reading proficiency scores for the nation's fourth graders. In 2000, NAEP conducted a national reading assessment and found that reading proficiency has remained relatively stable across assessment years. The recently published paper *The Nation's Report Card: Fourth-Grade Reading 2000* reports that students in rural and small town schools have higher reading scores than their urban peers and scores that are comparable to their suburban peers. Of rural and small town students, 35% were reading at below basic levels, 33% were at basic to proficient levels, 25% were at proficient to advanced levels, and 8% were at an advanced level. The full text of the report is currently only available online at http://www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/main2000/2001499.asp.

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Matters of Fact

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North Dakota rejects school consolidation bill

In North Dakota, a bill that would require all school districts to have a high school has died in the Senate on a 29-20 vote. The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction has argued that grade-school-only districts are much more expensive to administer and that consolidating districts would be more efficient. Similar bills have been introduced to the Senate every year for the past five years. While they have all been defeated in the past, the future is uncertain. After districts are reapportioned according to the 2000 Census, rural districts will lose representation and may lose support for maintaining grade-school-only districts. The chair of the Senate Education Committee, Sen. Layton Freborg, R-Underwood, has predicted that future sessions will pass a bill that will require consolidation and school closure.

Texas teacher shortage

Last fall, 19% of rural schools in Texas were unable to fill teaching vacancies by the start of the school year. According to a recent Texas A & M University study, urban schools also had difficulties in hiring, but rural schools had the most vacancies. Overall, 21% of vacant bilingual education positions, 17% of math positions, and 13% of foreign language positions were unfilled by the start of the school year last year. In response, the Legislature is considering a number of bills that would reduce the shortage, including a statewide health insurance plan for school employees, a teacher incentive pay plan, a mortgage assistance program and a college loan forgiveness plan.

South Carolina bill tries to block school-funding suits

South Carolina Senate President, Glenn McConnell, R-Charlestown, recently introduced a bill that would block the public's ability to challenge the state's education funding system. If passed, the bill would amend the state constitution to give the General Assembly the only word on education funding and would remove any judicial remedies. In 1993, a coalition of mostly rural school districts sued the state, saying that the system of using local taxes to fund education put rural districts at a disadvantage. In 1999, the state Supreme Court ruled that the state constitution mandated minimal education standards. The districts' case was sent back to a lower court.

Rural Policy Matters

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Rural Policy Matters

RPM 3.5

May 2001 A Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action www.ruraledu.org

Notes From The Field

The New Mexico Organizing Strategy

New Mexico is a land of beautiful geography inhabited by richly diverse cultures and people. It has stunningly beautiful red-capped mesas, snow-covered mountains, vast stretches of Chihuahuan desert, rivers, and forests. New Mexico is made up of Native Americans (23 tribes call New Mexico home); long-time Hispanic residents, many of whom trace their ancestry directly to Spain; newly arrived Spanish-speaking immigrants, primarily from Mexico; Anglos, many of whom are relative newcomers; and a small percentage of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and other ethnic groups. Alongside the physical beauty and cultural diversity are striking levels of poverty and inequality; poverty second only to West Virginia's; and inequality in wealth second only to that found in Arizona.

The New Mexico Organizing Strategy (NMOS), affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation, is organizing to mitigate such inequalities, both economic and in the education system. The NMOS is focusing much of its work in western New Mexico and the Four Corners area of the state. The Gallup-McKinley County School District is a border area of the Navajo Nation and is a school district larger than the state of Connecticut covering over 5,000 square miles. Over 80% of its students are on free or reduced lunch. The district loses over 1/3 of its teachers every year (often during the school year), with trained replacements simply unavailable. The Four Corners area, two hours north of Gallup, faces many of the same challenges. While increased funding for public education is not the only answer to better education, it is certainly a key one and would allow rural districts an opportunity for better facilities and much higher retention of teachers.

Because public education in New Mexico is funded at the state level, NMOS is working to develop power through a statewide network. To that end, on Sunday, April 1, 2001, the NMOS held an organizing assembly of 600 leaders representing nearly 100 institutions from various parts of the state. The assembly drew people from diverse cultures and a broad range of institutions that included congregations, synagogues, and other faith-based communities; the public schools, community college and the university; immigrant associations and labor unions.

Those gathered made a public commitment to organize much more deeply in their communities through small group meetings called "house meetings." The house meetings bring people together around their stories, their issues, and their passion, for the purpose of taking action. They are essential in identifying and training new leaders. At the April 1 assembly, 183 leaders signed commitment cards to host a house meeting.

The leaders also ran an "action" on the invited guests, State Representative Rick Miera, Chair of the House Education Committee, and David Martinez, from the New Mexico Department of Children, Youth, and Families. We challenged Mr. Miera to work with us to get decent pay for our professional educators, emphasizing that we are talking about public education "from birth through higher education." That is, the organizing work aims to build power and secure resources for all levels of education, encompassing early childhood development to higher education. A

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It's a Rough Road Out There:

Five State Study Documents Student Busing Experiences

Ever heard the old saw, "When I was your age, I had to walk 10 miles to school, barefoot, in the snow, up hill both ways"? According to new research by Craig Howley, Aimee Howley, and Steve Shamblen, some of today's rural students will be telling future generations, "When I was your age, I had to ride the bus for hours over mountainous, unpaved roads to a school far away from my home." Sadly, their tale will not be an exaggeration.

In their paper *The Experience of Rural School Bus Rides*, authors Howley, Howley, and Shamblen examine the bus-riding experiences of rural students compared to those of suburban students in five states (Arkansas, Georgia, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Washington). Using surveys of 1194 principals in rural and suburban elementary schools, the authors gathered data on 38 variables. (The authors chose not to include urban schools as urban busing tends to involve a different set of issues.) What they found was that rural students in every state have a very different bus-riding experience from that of their suburban peers.

Although the results varied by state and location, there were five consistent findings: 1) rural elementary students are more likely to ride the bus for more than thirty minutes each way, 2) rural elementary schools are more likely to draw students from areas larger than ten square miles, 3) rural students have a higher percentage of bus rides that are over rougher roads and hillier terrain, 4) rural schools are less likely to be in districts that have full-

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New Mexico

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quality educational system is essential to lifting New Mexicans out of their poverty.

Mr. Martinez was challenged to work with us around the issue of early childhood teacher compensation. Most early childhood workers are earning minimum wage in rural areas, with the state reimbursing subsidized children at a lower level in rural areas when in reality expenses are often higher. Even the highest paid childcare workers, usually in the federally funded Head Start programs, are only making $7 to $8 an hour. It is impossible to raise a healthy family on those wages, and the high teacher turnover that results from the low wages is devastating for the young children in the childcare centers.

The work before the NMOS is vast, but the recent action painted a colorful mosaic and inspiring portrait of what a statewide power organization could bring: broad sectors of the state's population, working across class, race, and ethnic lines, to engage in politics in the very best sense of that term. That is, to engage in public discussion around the people's business and to participate in public policymaking to harness resources and power not just for the few but for the many, who make the Land of Enchantment their home.

– Eleanor Milroy

For more information, contact Eleanor Milroy, the lead organizer of the New Mexico Organizing Strategy (NMOS) at 5500 Villa Canela Ct., NW, Albuquerque, NM 87107, 505.269.2453 or email ejmilroy@aol.com. The NMOS is supported in part by the Rural School and Community Trust.◆

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Busing

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time bus supervisors, and 5) rural bus routes are more likely to transport a mixture of elementary, middle, and/or high school students.

To come to these conclusions, the authors asked both rural and suburban elementary school principals to answer questions about what bus rides were like for students in their schools. The survey included questions about the bus ride itself (time in transit, wait times, transfers, etc.) as well as questions about how students experienced the bus ride (terrain, weather, discipline problems, etc.). The authors also gathered basic demographic information and information on the characteristics of the school/district transportation system.

Using a variety of statistical analyses, Howley, Howley and Shamblen found that some rural-suburban differences were consistent across the five states, but that most of the differences were state-specific. Only in Pennsylvania, for example, are rural students more likely than suburban students to experience en-route transfers to other buses. In Georgia, rural principals reported that 40% of bus routes traveled unpaved minor roads, compared to 12% of suburban bus routes. In New Mexico, 94% of suburban districts employed a full-time transportation director, compared to 42% of rural districts. Students in rural Arkansas experience the roughest bus rides.

Some findings appeared in more than one state. In Georgia, Pennsylvania and Washington, rural principals are more likely to associate longer bus rides with decreased parental involvement. In Arkansas, Pennsylvania and Washington, larger percentages of rural students ride the bus. In New Mexico and Washington, rural districts are more likely to include bus drivers in IEP meetings and are more likely to have formal policies on bus discipline.

The fact that rural students have different experiences riding the bus than do suburban students does not come as much of a surprise. Many of the findings in this report seem obvious. So why does any of this matter?

What makes busing such a big deal is that it reflects the importance of having schools connected to their communities. Very little research has been done on the impact that busing has on the lives of rural students, their families, and their communities. We know that busing is an integral piece of rural education, but we don't know the effect of that piece. Every time rural schools and districts are consolidated, schools get farther away from the communities they serve. Kids spend more time on the bus, more money goes to transportation, and little by little, we chip away at rural education.

While there is little empirical evidence (this report notwithstanding), we can assume that busing plays a bigger role in the lives and educations of rural students than most policymakers seem to give it credit for. This research gives us important insights into just how big that role is. It also makes clear how much more research is necessary.

Based on their research, Howley, Howley and Shamblen suggest that discussions need to begin on issues such as how many students are needed in a school to keep bus rides to an appropriate length, the influence of one-campus school districts on the length of bus rides, and the acceptable grade spans for rural schools. They also suggest that the fact many rural elementary school students ride the bus for more than an hour a day should sound alarm bells for policymakers. Yet so far, it has not.

In finding that the rural busing experience differs from state to state and by locale, the authors reinforce the notion that "one-size-fits-all" policies do not work for rural schools. Busing policy, as with other issues, must be developed based on what makes sense for rural schools and communities.

The Experience of Rural School Bus Rides was funded in part by a grant from the Rural School and Community Trust Policy Program.◆

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State Actions

Nebraska's Rural Education Day

The Nebraska Alliance for Rural Education, a coalition of Nebraska grassroots organizations supporting rural schools and communities, and the Center for Rural Affairs, a non-profit advocacy organization based in Walthill, Nebraska, co-sponsored a Rural Education Day at the state capitol. People from throughout the state crowded into the former Senate chamber (discontinued for use when Nebraska became the nation's only single-house, or unicameral, legislature in the 1930s) to hear speakers and rally opposition to two school consolidation bills scheduled for public hearing later that day. One (LB 380) would create countywide school districts, shutting down over 400 school districts in the state. The other (LB 431) would create a task force to "reduce and reconfigure" school districts.

Jerry Hoffman, Executive Director of the Alliance asked the gathering why Nebraska would "want to make larger schools when the rest of the nation is beginning to see that what Nebraska has is what they want?" Researchers Jon Bailey and Patricia Funk presented findings showing how the state's aid formula discriminates against rural schools and taxpayers (see *Digging Deeper Into Shallow Pockets*, by Jon Bailey and Kim Preston, and *Shortchanging Small Schools: Nebraska's School Finance Policy*, by Patricia Funk at the Center's web site, www.cfra.org).

Many participants testified to the legislature's Education Committee later that day, and neither consolidation bill was advanced to the full legislature. The session is not scheduled to end until after this article appears, but chances of the bills advancing at this late date are slim. *For more information, contact **Jerry Hoffman at the Nebraska Alliance for Rural Education, 8011 Meredeth Street, Lincoln, NE 68506, 402.483.6037, jhoffman@neb.rr.com, or Kim Preston at Center for Rural Affairs, Box 406, Walthill, NE 68067, (402) 846-5428, kimp@cfra.org.***

Pennsylvania's www.studentsforchange.net

The Pennsylvania School Reform Network has launched a web site for kids who want to get involved in the continuing political debate in that state over school finance and other education issues. Visitors to the website can get basic information about how the legislative process works, background on current bills, links to organizations and background information on issues ranging from testing to finance to free speech, a chat room to exchange ideas, a mountain of statistics and other facts about education in Pennsylvania, and a handy directory that gives you information about your elected officials and a direct link to their email addresses. If you know where you live, you can connect to your State Senator or Representative instantly. Check it out: www.studentsforachange.net

Vermont Children's Forum Promotes Equity Funding

In 1997, the Vermont Legislature passed its landmark Equal Education Opportunity Act (EEOA or Act 60) which shares the property wealth of the entire state to finance the education of all of the state's children and allows residents to pay property taxes based on their income. The new system of funding has generated vigorous opposition from people in property wealthy towns. Property tax payers in most rural communities in Vermont have benefited but opponents in wealthier towns — so-called "Gold Towns"— have protested loudly. But the rural folk are getting organized, thanks to efforts of the Vermont Children's Forum, which is monitoring legislative activities and implemen-ting a public education and media campaign about the issues. Hearings by the Senate Finance Committee in April (after press time) were a crucial opportunity for rural people to take a stand. For an update, contact Barbara Postman at 802.229.6377; bpostman@together.net.❖

Connecting the Dots: *Facilities Network Grows*

What is only a few months old and has over 100 members in 36 states and the District of Columbia? The answer is, of course, the Rural Trust's growing facilities network. People participating in the online discussion represent a wide range of perspectives. We have school board members, principals, teachers, superintendents, parents, community members, community organizers and activists, policymakers, legislators, officials in state and federal departments of education and other agencies including the education laboratories, USDA, and the US DOE; architects, engineers, community planners, people in foundations, and many others.

Several members have commented that the email discussion has already been interesting and helpful. For example an architect told us, "the value...appears to be increasing daily. The quality and experience of participants has led to some compelling dialogue." A member from a rural community said "I really enjoy reading the information you send to me daily. I am trying to sort through and determine how I can use this to help our situation in Southwest Virginia," and a person with a government agency said, "This is potentially an extremely valuable forum for sharing practical ideas and experiences about how things can be done differently."

Members have been discussing issues including consolidation, the sustainability of small communities, the value of small schools, legislation that supports small schools and limits the size of schools, a successful renovation project that renewed a school in Greenfield, Ohio, as well as sources of funding for projects and many other topics.

We hope you will join us by sending an email expressing your interest to the facilities coordinator: barbara.lawrence@ruraledu.org.❖

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Matters Of Fact

Global place-based education?

World-Class Standards and Local Pedagogies: Can We Do Both? by Thomas J. Gibbs and Aimee Howley (December 2000) is an ERIC Digest that compares and contrasts the underlying commitments and practical implications of standards-based versus place-based education reform. "A growing movement to ground school curriculum and instruction in local geography, ecology, culture, economy, and history — often referred to as place-based education — is capturing the attention of many rural educators across the country. Some see this approach as a way to address the decline of many rural communities, including the out-migration of young people, by preparing students to live productive and fully engaged lives in their home communities. However, this view of education seems to put its proponents in conflict with the national movement to adopt academic standards and accountability measures." The Digest is available at http://www.ael.org/eric/digests/edorc008.htm.

Publications on the rural South

The most recent issue of *Rural America* is devoted to the rural South and includes articles on education, housing, job training, welfare reform, child well-being, demographic trends, and poverty. It can be ordered by calling 1.800.999.6779 or downloaded at http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/ruralamerica/ra154 The latest issue of the Southern Rural Development Consortium's *Southern Perspectives* focuses on risk management in rural communities. Articles include *Risk and the Rural Community: Coping with Economic and Natural Disaster* and *A Rural Community Safety Net.* To download a PDF copy, go to http://ext.msstate.edu/srdc/publications/sp_winter2001.pdf.

Re-opening isolated rural schools in Montana

The Montana Legislature has enacted a bill that revises the procedures for opening or reopening an elementary school in isolated rural areas of the state. New provisions include lowering the number of parents required to initiate a petition for a school opening or reopening. Schools can apply to be classified as isolated. Applications must include "a description of conditions affecting transportation such as poor roads, mountains, rivers, or other obstacles to travel, the distance the school is from the nearest open school having room and facilities for the pupils of the school, or any other condition that would result in an unusual hardship to the pupils...if they were transported to another school." The full text of HB 358 can be found at http://data.opi.state.mt.us/bills/2001/billhtml/HB0358.htm.❖

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Notes From The Field

Student Voices at the Ohio Statehouse

Around 900 students from school districts all over Ohio rallied on the Statehouse lawn May 9, calling for a real solution to the school funding problem. Many carried homemade signs, some simply announcing the school they were from, others highlighting the needs of their schools. The students stole the show, taking turns at the microphone to lead the crowd in chanting, "Fix school funding NOW!"

The rally was part of a day-long event organized by the Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy in School Funding. Participants gathered at the nearby Athenaeum for an update on the litigation and current legislation related to the case. Some students left the morning program to meet with state legislators, share their views and ask questions. Over half of the members of the General Assembly provided meeting times for interested students.

Two sophomores from Alexander High School, Golden Fanning and Elissa Conover, spoke at the rally, reading their award-winning speeches on school funding. Conover read her poem, summing up the mood of the students gathered on the lawn: "Whatever it may take to get our fair share/For every rally held, you know we'll be there."

In the case of *DeRolph vs. Ohio*, the state Supreme Court ruled in 1997 and again in 2000 that Ohio's system of funding public education is unconstitutional. During the course of this lawsuit, many proposals for reform were discussed, and legislation was passed to try to address the problem. To date, however, these efforts have failed to satisfy the Ohio Constitution.

The main thrust of the Court's decision is that Ohio's system does not provide enough resources to schools, and does not provide them fairly. The current system relies heavily on local property taxes, which creates extreme disparities in funding. *Education Week* magazine gave Ohio a failing grade for equity in its distribution of money to schools.

The May 9 Statehouse event was the culmination of a team effort by the Rural School and Community Organizing Project and the Appalachian Initiative for School Funding, a local citizen group, to increase the involvement of students, teachers and parents in the funding debate. The project began by producing a curriculum packet on the *DeRolph* case to be used in civics or government classes. More than 80 school districts received copies of the curriculum, and a number of teachers used the resources as a significant part of their Ohio government classes. One teacher at Federal Hocking High School made lobbying a part of the course requirement for his senior government class.

The project then shifted to a more mobilizing phase. Districts using the materials, as well as those within a 75-mile radius of Columbus, were contacted and provided with a smaller packet of information on the case. Students entered a contest in which they could win a $250 scholarship and a chance to speak at the rally for writing the best speech on school funding. Team members lined up appointment times with legislators and made countless calls to schools right up until the Friday before the rally. The team expected at least 400 students to attend the rally; as mentioned, over 900 showed up.

It was clear that some schools hadn't planned to lobby their legislators, and some were daunted at the thought of having students trekking around downtown Columbus. But a

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Leveling Off and Zeroing Out

Budget Cuts Hit Facilities Programs

HR 1, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, has been moving slowly through the complicated channels of Congress, with many programs either funded at the same level ("level-funded") or dropped altogether ("zeroed out"). The School Modernization Bill, which would have offered districts substantial funding for new construction and repairs, was eliminated early in congressional discussions. However, there is still hope for the much smaller Emergency Repair and Renovation Grants, or Public Law 106-554: School Renovation, IDEA, and Technology Grants which will provide almost $1 billion for emergency repair and renovation to districts with desperate need for facilities work, and protected rural interests. For more information, go to www.ed.gov/inits/construction/rengrants.html

In mid-May members of Congress discussed making allocation of funds in the Emergency Repair and Renovation Grants open to the discretion of the states, which was a concern for two reasons. First, emergency repairs and renovations become necessary when maintenance has been deferred over a long period of time. In many districts, maintenance is the only discretionary item in the budget, and too often superintendents, under pressure to find funds, siphon money from maintenance to pay for textbooks, teacher pay raises and other competing purposes. The ultimate cost of deferred maintenance, particularly in rural places, can be the closing of the school when the estimated cost of repairs exceeds a state-mandated percentage of the cost of new construction.The concern

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Ohio

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number of meetings did take place, and a few eyes were opened. One group reportedly asked pointed questions of a representative, and when he dodged their questions, kept asking, thinking he hadn't understood them. He finally walked out on the students. At last report, the entire class was planning to discuss this event, and try to understand what had happened.

Currently, the state has crafted a plan that no one expects to hold up under Court scrutiny. The Supreme Court will review the "remedy" beginning June 15. The team fully expects to be working on this issue in the coming year, and has learned some valuable lessons. The curriculum guide will be revised and updated, and there are plans to provide more classroom support. In addition, legislators will be encouraged to visit schools and meet with students in their home districts. And finally, the group plans to create a giant puppet theater on the topic, which could go on the road as an educational piece for students, parents and teachers. All of this will increase the effectiveness of this project, and help get the voices of students, particularly from rural areas, into the discussion.

Overall, the rally was a high-energy event that communicated the fact that many in the education community are not satisfied with the current proposal offered in the budget bill. And the education community is NOT only composed of school administrators. There's a vibrant, caring body of students and teachers in Ohio who are also concerned. On May 9, that concern was made visible in a dramatic, loud, and important way.

– Debbie Phillips

For more information, contact Debbie Phillips, the Co-Coordinator for the Rural School and Community Organizing Project of Rural Action, at P.O. Box 157, Trimble, OH 45782, 740.593.7970 or email debbiep@frognet.net. Rural Action Inc. is funded in part by the Rural School and Community Trust.❖

School Facilities

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was that districts might decide to spend the repair and renovation money on other programs.

The second reason for concern was that there was too little money allocated for repairs and renovation. Increasing the purposes for which that money could be used without increasing the funding simply watered down what was available for repairs and renovation. However, no one was prepared for what Congress has now done to the Emergency Repair and Renovation Grants: eliminate the funding by repealing the program provision in the 2002 budget.

This decision comes at a critical time. A number of studies have shown that many facilities are in bad condition, particularly schools serving poor and rural districts (see www.ruraledu.org/fac_report_summaries.html). First, many of the schools built in the early 1900's have exceeded their estimated life spans of 75 years, as have schools built in the 1950's and 1960's, which were not as well constructed and had a shorter expected useful life. Second, deferred maintenance has undermined the condition of school facilities; third, the increase in student population has heightened the need for school facility capacity. Fourth, the new census shows that in some places population is declining rapidly, while in others (particularly areas that attract immigrants) population is expanding, and with it so expands the need for new schools. In some places the challenge is what to do with abandoned facilities, in others it is to find and fund new schools, either by sharing facilities in the community, adapting existing buildings or constructing new schools.

In any case, poor rural districts will be particularly hard pressed to solve their problems in providing adequate school facilities. One strength of the Emergency Repair and Renovation program was that it protected rural interests by requiring State Educational Agencies (SEAs) to, at the minimum, give rural Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) the same amount of funding that they received in FY 2001 and no less than the funding awarded to other LEAs in the state. This wording if continued in Fiscal 2002 reauthorization, would have protected rural districts from having all the federal funds awarded to urban districts, which has been the case in some states in the granting of QZABs (see below).

In a related decision, Congress level-funded the Research and Dissemination program, which may impact funding for the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities (NCEF). NCEF is the only federal source of information about school facilities, and has been a tremendous resource for people in the field as well as community people looking for information about facilities (see www.edfacilities.org). Many people who are concerned that this program may be eliminated are writing their representatives in support of the Clearinghouse, and there is still hope that NCEF will receive full funding support.

The good news is that QZAB or Qualified Zone Academy Bond, (see www.ruraledu.org/fac_report_summaries.html) was proposed for extension for one more year. You can find more information about this program at www.ed.gov/inits/construction/qzab.html.❖

Matters of Fact

***Kids Count* update**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has released the 2001 update of the *Kids Count Data Book*, which ranks the states based on several indicators of child well-being. According to the report, the states with the highest percentages of children in poverty are New Mexico and Louisiana, both very rural states. Overall, the highest (best) ranking states were New Hampshire, Minnesota, Utah, Massachusetts and Wisconsin. The lowest (worst) ranking states were Mississippi, Louisiana, New Mexico, Arkansas and Alabama. The *2001 Kids*

Count Data Book is available through the Annie E. Casey Foundation website at www.aecf.org or by calling 410.223.2890.

More consolidation in Illinois?

Rural and small schools may be facing another round of consolidations in Illinois. New census figures showing population growth in Chicago and its suburbs mean more elected officials from that area and fewer from rural communities. A bill was recently passed in the House that proposes several financial incentives to get schools to consider consolidating. Measures include giving newly formed districts more taxing power, removing the requirement that voters approve annexations of one district to another, and putting new districts on par with overcrowded and dilapidated schools for school construction grants. Senate President James Philip was quoted by the Associated Press as saying, "They've got a principal for each school, they've got superintendents for schools, assistant superintendents. We ought to force consolidation."

Teacher salary survey finds South Dakota at the bottom

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has released its annual survey of teacher salaries. Connecticut ranks first with an average annual salary of $52,410, while South Dakota ranks last with an average annual salary of $29,072. Other high paying states include New York, New Jersey, Michigan and Pennsylvania. Other low paying states include Oklahoma, North Dakota, Mississippi and Montana. For beginning teacher salaries, North Dakota comes in last with an average beginning salary of $20,422. The AFT reports that the average teacher salary increase in the 1999-2000 school year was among the smallest in 40 years and failed to keep pace with inflation, while the average beginning salary increase was actually less than the year before. For more information, visit www.aft.org or call 202.879.4400.◆

Bill of Rights: *Shouldn't Students Know All Sides of the Constitutional Debate?*

Editorial Comment

At this writing, the Alabama House of Representatives is mulling over legislation that would require all public school students to prove they understand the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Federalist Papers before they graduate.

No one would quarrel with the importance of these documents, and we hope everyone does understand them. We note, however, that as a society we really have not stopped arguing about what they really mean, as the recent presidential election demonstrated. We should be lucky to understand the contradictions, controversies and dilemmas in these cherished documents.

And that is what makes the proposed legislation troubling. For it prescribes that students understand only one side of perhaps our most crucial national debate–that over the adoption of the U.S. Constitution. The bill would require that students study only the Federalist Papers, those profound and convincing arguments written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay favoring voter adoption of the Constitution. It says nothing about the importance of knowing the contrary point of view expressed in the historically ignored Anti-Federalist Papers. This is a proud history, especially for rural children to know, and an important political lesson for everyone.

The Anti-Federalists were farmers, local merchants and landless people living mostly in the fast-growing rural hinterland of the new nation. They prized liberty and feared too much power concentrated in too few hands. They worried that a strong federal government might infringe on their recently hard-won civil liberties. Though the names of their spokespeople are largely lost in history–Melancton Smith, Mercy Warren, Richard Henry Lee, Rufus Kin –they fought hard against adoption of the Constitution. Among their most convincing arguments was the failure of the document to provide any protection for individual liberties.

The battle over adoption took place over a period of months, in 13 hard-fought state conventions. It could have gone either way but for the fact that the Federalists finally promised to add amendments–a Bill of Rights that, among its blessings, protects freedom of speech, religion, and press; guarantees your right to meet with others and to complain to the government about its laws and actions; prohibits officials from putting you in jail without being charged, and found guilty of a crime and given the opportunity to cross-examine witnesses against you. And it says you can't be forced to testify against yourself, which serves as the primary protection against coerced confessions.

These rights we take for granted. We should not. And we should not graduate students from high school who are officially required to understand only the arguments of those who thought these rights not worth mentioning until forced to do so. The Bill of Rights is rural America's great political legacy to the nation. The Anti-Federalists lost the battle over adoption of the Constitution, but won the war for civil liberties.

–Marty Strange, director, Rural Trust Policy Program◆

Seeking Your Input

We need to hear from you. Your stories of struggle and success could grace these pages. Share what you know about action and issues in your area. 802.728.5899

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E-Rate Update

The E-rate, the program that has provided discounts on telecommunications services to tens of thousands of schools and libraries across the country, is facing some changes. The current $5.195 billion demand for Year 4 E-rate funding is more than double the amount available. Due to the continuing high demand, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is proposing to change the way discounts for internal connections are prioritized and distributed.

As it stands now, discounts for schools are based on the number of students in poverty, which is determined by the number of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunches. Because telecommunications costs are higher in rural areas, the E-rate formula also kicks in a higher discount for rural schools with free and reduced lunch rates below 50%. However, with the demand as high as it is, there isn't enough money to fund all of the requests. According to the Schools and Libraries Division (SLD), of the Universal Service Administrative Company–the body set up to disperse these funds, if the current rules are not changed, high poverty schools that would normally be eligible for a 90% discount will instead receive a prorated 73% discount and schools falling below a 90% discount level would receive no funding at all for internal connections.

The FCC has two choices. They can either 1) prorate discount levels for schools at or above 90% discount levels; or 2) give priority to those schools who did not receive discounts on internal connections in Year 3. To ensure a fair system of distribution, the FCC is considering the latter option, which would allow the estimated $835 million available to fund internal connections to be made available to schools and libraries down to the 81% discount level. (Those schools below an 81% discount level would still receive no funding for internal connections.) All schools and libraries applying for discounts on telephone service and Internet access would not be affected by the proposed ruling and would still be fully funded.

The FCC's public comment period ended on May 23. Reply comments were due on or before May 30. It's now up to the FCC to decide on the fairest way to distribute E-rate funds given capped funding levels and continuing demand.❖

More Free Stuff!

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Rural Policy Matters

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Rural Policy Matters

RPM 3.7

July/August 2001 — Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action — www.ruraledu.org

Notes From The Field

Louisiana Youth in the House

On July 6-8 the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN) held its first annual Youth in Motion Conference in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. LEAN, a state-wide, grassroots environmental organization has always included youth in its events, but this year decided to have a conference dedicated solely to youth.

The conference was a success in many ways. First and foremost, it had a great attendance bringing over 100 youth and parents from all over Louisiana, and even Mississippi. Those who attended were excited to be at such a groundbreaking event and were ecstatic to meet new people who shared the same interests.

The workshops focused mainly on empowering participants with tools to strengthen their communities. The conference brought speakers such as Collis Temple, III, an LSU basketball player, Florence Robinson, a biology professor and environmental justice activist, Roy Quezaire, a Louisiana State Representative, Lora Hinton, the first African-American to sign a scholarship with LSU and Emily Andrews from the Friends For Life organization.

A couple of the workshops focused on issues based in and around schools. LEAN has been working on the issue of pesticides in schools as an after-school program sponsored by the Rural School and Community Trust, and decided to bring it to the conference. The workshop focused on the problems with pesticides in schools, and set the stage for other workshops that focused on what participants could do to affect change in their communities and schools. One workshop did exactly that. A school and community organizing workshop was presented by Albertha Hasten, an Iberville Parish school board member, David Brown, a student activist, and Brett Holmes, a student who challenged school policy on [hair] "braid" laws in school.

Of course there were many fun activities for the youth. They had plenty of free time to hang out by the pool and meet the other conference participants. There were cooperative games for younger kids which taught teamwork, group dynamics and environmentally friendly crafts. On Saturday evening the group made a field trip to Alligator Bayou where they went on a bayou boat tour to learn about Louisiana wildlife and culture.

The conference ended on a great note with many of the participants giving good evaluations and stating that they would love to have another one soon. Many LEAN staff and members were very pleased, and plans are in the works for another conference with increased involvement by the youth in the planning and some more of the great things which made this conference a success.

— Andy Allen, educational instructor for LEAN

For more information, contact LEAN Director Marylee M. Orr, P.O. Box 66323, Baton Rouge, LA 70896, 225.928.1315, or email lean007@aol.com, www.leanweb.org. ❖

Featured Project

Read about the work of Ohio Rural Action and the DeRolph finance case on our website at www.ruraledu.org.

Lake View: *The Little District That Could*

Tiny Lake View school district in the impoverished Mississippi Delta region of Eastern Arkansas filed a law suit against the state in 1992 claiming that Arkansas' school finance system was unconstitutionally unfair to the children in that rural district.

With just 200 kids in a K-12 district that has only one school and a budget last year of about $1 million (and less than $5 million in property valuation) it seemed unlikely in 1992 that Lake View could mount a legal offensive strong enough to prevail.

But nine years later, a court has ruled in its favor.

The court had tentatively reached the same conclusion in 1994, but gave the state two years to change its school funding system, which it did. In 1998, the court ruled that the changes were fair enough, and dismissed Lake View's case. Undaunted, Lake View appealed to the Arkansas Supreme Court, which last year ruled that the district at least deserved a chance to prove in a trial that the changes made since 1994 did not go far enough toward fairness.

The stakes then became higher when Judge Collins Kilgore ruled that the trial would not only determine whether the finance system distributed funds fairly among districts, but whether it distributed enough funding to provide an adequate education. After trial last fall, Judge Kilgore ruled in March that the school funding system in Arkansas is both inequitable and inadequate.

The facts about Lake View bear notice. This is a school district in which 94 percent of the children qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. It is so impoverished that its high school math faculty consists of an uncertified substitute teacher paid

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Lake View

continued from page 1

$10,000 per year to teach pre-algebra, algebra I and II, geometry, and trigonometry. He supplements that meager salary by earning $5,000 a year to drive the school bus. In the classroom, he operates with two electrical outlets, calculators for less than half his students, no compasses for geometry, a computer printer that does not work, and an old "addressograph" duplicating machine that works so rarely that even examinations have to be handwritten on the one chalk-board in his classroom.

Still, Lake View has a "can do" attitude that produces an attendance rate of 99 percent, a graduation rate of 94.7percent, and a dropout rate of 2 percent, all better than the state average. In effect, Judge Kilgore said they shouldn't have to do so much with so little.

Teacher salary disparities between wealthy and poor districts were especially worrisome to the judge. Lake View's high school science teacher, who has 31 years of experience and two master's degrees, makes $31,500 per year. At wealthier Ft. Smith, a teacher with comparable preparation and experience would make $43,524.

Such disparities, Judge Kilgore said, "work to destabilize the education system by driving qualified teachers away from districts where they are most needed."

Quoting an earlier Arkansas court decision, Judge Kilgore made it clear that equity between districts on matters like teacher salaries is every bit as important as providing a minimum adequate level of funding everywhere: "For some districts to supply the barest necessities and others to have programs generously endowed does not meet the requirements of the constitution. Bare and minimal sufficiency does not translate into equal educational opportunity."

Disparity in teacher salaries must be eliminated, he admonished in his March ruling. And overall, teacher salaries in the state must come up– "no deficiency in our education system is in more urgent need of attention than teachers salaries," the Judge wrote.

He also said the state must provide:

- Buildings properly equipped and suitable for instruction;
- Pre-school programs for children who need them to compete academically with their peers;
- The funding necessary to meet its constitutional obligations and a study of the amount needed to do so throughout the state is required.

In perhaps his biggest bombshell, the judge also ruled that Lake View's attorneys must be paid for their work by the state, because the fruits of their labors will benefit the state as a whole, not just their clients. He awarded them a stunning $9,338,035.

The state will appeal the decision. ❖

Yes, New Jersey. Rural Counts, Too

In New Jersey, a group of 17 small, mostly rural school districts has won the right to a trial later this year before a state administrative law judge to determine whether they should be eligible for the same improvements mandated in 30 large, urban districts by a series of court decisions. The improvements include: smaller class sizes, better facilities, more qualified staff, pre-school programs, and the funding to pay for these improvements.

Over 25 years of nearly continuous litigation has resulted in eight court rulings that New Jersey's school funding system is unconstitutional as it applies to the 30 large, urban districts. Each decision has specified benefits that must be provided by the state to these districts, known as "Abbott" districts for the name of the lead plaintiff. But, the small districts claim they are just as poor as the Abbott districts, since all 17 are among the poorest 20 percent of districts according to the state's own ranking system. Ironically, some of the 30 Abbott districts are not among the poorest 20 percent.

Many of the small districts are elementary-only "feeder" districts that send kids on to high school in some of the Abbott districts. Most are in rural, southern New Jersey. ❖

Matters of Fact

North Dakota teachers get a boost from the DOE

The University of North Dakota Teacher Education Program has received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education that is designed to help with technology training and to encourage teaching at smaller rural schools. The grant will provide $200,000 each year for three years. It will also support partnership agreements with rural school districts so that more UND students will get student teaching experience in rural schools. The goals of the program are to give UND students more field-based experience with technology in teaching and to encourage new teachers to stay and teach in North Dakota.

Arizona's rural schools under pressure

Sixteen small and rural school districts in Arizona have requested state money to build 32 new elementary schools and three new high schools to accommodate the rapid population growth that is taking place in Arizona's small town and rural communities. Right now, those sixteen districts have a combined enrollment of 26,000 students. By 2004-05, that number will more than double. Funding for the new construction is coming from Arizona's Students FIRST (Fair and Immediate Resources for Students Today) program. Students FIRST is a school capital finance program funded by revenues from the state sales tax and is intended to provide funds for correcting deficiencies in current buildings, building renovation, and new school construction.

Rural districts to take on Iowa's sales tax law

Rural school districts in Iowa want a statewide one-cent sales tax increase that would provide revenues for all schools, and are preparing to sue the state to get it. Currently, Iowa has a local-option sales-tax law that allows all schools in a county to share

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Nebraska Faces Consolidation Legislation

Nebraska's rural schools were the target of a consolidation bill that was recently introduced and defeated in the State Legislature. LB431 sought to close an unlimited number of rural schools by 2006 and would have created a "School Structure Task Force" designed to develop a plan to "reduce and reconfigure" school districts in the state.

LB431's sponsor, Senator Chris Beutler of Lincoln, introduced a similar plan in his amendment to a school finance bill last year. That amendment would have closed up to 40 school districts by 2003. Despite being opposed by all rural members of the Legislature, that bill still came within six votes of passage.

According to a spokesperson for the organization Friends of Rural Education (FRED), the schools generally targeted for "elimination" have excellent academic performance, less than one-tenth of the drop-out rate of the larger Nebraska schools, and enjoy great community support. "In Nebraska, 'efficiency' of schools has come to be seen as nothing more than code for cramming as many students into low-performing large schools as they can, with little or no consideration of effectiveness or educational outcomes," he said.

The Nebraska school finance law groups school districts in three cost groupings–standard, sparse and very sparse. Sparse and very sparse are based on students per square mile in the district. The standard cost grouping consists of over 70 percent of the districts in the state, primarily in the more heavily populated eastern and central parts of the state, and has no relation to school size or enrollment. LB431 applies only to districts in the standard cost grouping.

As introduced, LB431 called for the creation of a 16 member School Structure Task Force. In two phases to be completed by December 1, 2001 and 2002, the Task Force would ultimately determine whether "reduction or reconfiguration of school districts in the standard cost grouping is advisable" and would issue a detailed plan to the Legislature on specific districts to merge or unify.

Analysts from the FRED Data Center commented: "Much, if not most, education legislation in Nebraska does not appear to be about students, teachers or education, but rather seems to be about protecting tax breaks for powerful urban interests in the state.

"Nebraska consistently has ranked in the top five or six states for student performance, while teacher salaries have deteriorated into the bottom few. School districts, especially rural, have become starved for finances, and all this while enormous tax breaks are provided to powerful interest groups."

On March 6, 2001, the Education Committee of the Legislature held a hearing on LB431. Sen. Beutler stated that the study that would be undertaken by the Task Force would answer questions about whether some schools existed "simply as a town economic development center" and whether the current structure of school districts was the best mode of education. He also stated that he believed many districts might be passing up opportunities to improve education and passing up merger and consolidation opportunities without thinking of the best interests of children. In addition to Sen. Beutler, Virgil Horne, lobbyist for the Lincoln Public Schools is also a proponent of the bill. Members of the Lincoln Public Schools school board have made statements in the past about the need to "close inefficient rural schools" in order to free funds for other school districts (such as Lincoln).

A coalition of rural education, agricultural and farmer organizations and rural citizens opposed the bill. Thirteen people testified as opponents to the bill. Among the organizations opposed to the bill were: Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association; Class Is United; Center for Rural Affairs; Friends of Rural Education; Nebraska Farmers Union; and the Nebraska State Grange. Much of the testimony focused on how Phase I of the

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Nebraska

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proposed Task Force study–to study the resources necessary for quality educational opportunities and other policy issues–might be worthwhile. However, Phase II–the recommendations on school closings–was an arrow aimed directly at rural schools.

On May 15, 2001, the Education Committee voted unanimously to indefinitely Postpone (or kill) LB431. This means the bill will have to be reintroduced in 2002 to receive further consideration. Analysts from the FRED Data Center note that while LB431 has been defeated, the pressure to consolidate Nebraska's rural schools will return.

— Reported by Jon Bailey, Rural Policy Program Director for the Center for Rural Affairs.

For more information, contact the Center for Rural Affairs, 101 S Tallman St - PO Box 406, Walthill, NE 68067, 402. 846.5428 or email info@cfra.org, www.cfra.org. ❖

Intelligence Gathering

Can you help us identify other states where legislation similar to Nebraska's LB 1241 have been introduced in the past year? Send your "intelligence report" to the Policy Program, PO Box 68, Randolph, VT 05060; email: policy.program@ruraledu.org.

Matters of Fact

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money that is generated by a sales tax increase and earmarked for school construction and property tax relief. According to the Iowa Association of School Boards, most of the sixteen counties that have passed the tax have large retail centers and have raised $120 million a year. The school board association estimates that a one-cent statewide sales tax would generate about $350 million per year. The potential lawsuit comes after several failed attempts to get lawmakers to re-write the existing tax law.

Virginia losing teachers due to SOL

Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) are contributing to the state's impending teacher shortage. The Washington Post recently reported that teachers in Virginia's public schools are retiring early, moving to private schools, or moving to grades or subjects where students don't take the SOL exams. Currently, students in third, fifth, and eighth grades and high school students taking English, math, science, and social studies take the SOL tests. Starting with the class of 2004, students must pass six tests in order to graduate. The SOL tests have been in place for three years and teachers have expressed concern over the pressure to raise scores, the number of drills students must do, and the lack of time provided to focus on any one topic in depth.

Rural Policy Matters

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RPM 3.8

Rural Policy Matters

September 2001 — A Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action — www.ruraledu.org

Rural Education Finance Center Ready to Work

The Rural School and Community Trust recently announced the establishment of the Rural Education Finance Center (REFC), and the appointment of Gregory C. Malhoit as its Director. The new center will provide services to rural groups across the nation.

"School finance is one of the most critical policy issues facing rural schools, and yet rural schools are largely absent from public debates on the subject," said Rural Trust President Rachel Tompkins in announcing the REFC. "We hope the Rural Education Finance Center will draw more attention to the problems —and help forge solutions that provide rural schoolchildren with greater equity."

The Center's establishment comes at a time when rural schools throughout the country are being squeezed by three forces:

- An inadequate local tax base from which to build and support schools;
- Resistance to paying local property taxes; and
- Policy environments in many states that treat rural schools as a burden on economically wealthier areas.

In addition, rural schools are increasingly the focus of legal action contending that state funding formulas are not equitable or adequate for rural children. As legislative remedies are devised, there is a need for rural citizens to participate in the process of creating new, more equitable funding mechanisms.

It is against this backdrop that the REFC is being established. The Center will work to:

Help rural people and organizations act as responsible and effective advocates for equitable funding for all public schools serving rural communities.

Support good research, sponsoring rigorous scholarly research on school finance issues that are critical to rural schools and communities, and sharing the findings in plain language.

Promote good fiscal management, identifying and promoting "best practices" for rural schools, developing the skills to use these practices, and advocating public policies that encourage their use.

Provide legal support on current legal issues involving school finance systems. While the REFC does not enter into litigation or represent groups in court proceedings, it may provide "friend of the court" briefs.

Monitor and report on policy, tracking developments affecting rural school finance nationwide, providing a central clearinghouse for timely information on how these developments affect rural schools and communities, and improving understanding of rural issues among the general public and the news media.

In announcing the REFC, Rural Trust president Tompkins also announced the appointment of Gregory C. Malhoit as the new Center's director.

"We are delighted that this project will get off the ground under the direction of someone with the impressive legal and advocacy credentials of Greg Malhoit," she said.

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Teacher Recruitment and Retention:

What works in the Midwest

The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) recently released the results of its survey on teacher recruitment and retention strategies in the Midwest. Among the key findings was the fact that small schools are an important mechanism for recruiting and keeping good teachers.

The survey, which was sent to superintendents in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin, is summarized in the report: *Effective Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategies in the Midwest: Who is Making Use of Them* by Debra Hare and James Heap. The report is based on the survey's two main questions: 1) Do superintendents have difficulty retaining high-quality teachers? and 2) What strategies did superintendents implement to retain and attract high quality teachers and how effective are those strategies?

The most successful strategies included: new teacher support programs; small schools or restructuring schools to make them smaller; recruiting teachers from the local community; and treating teachers as professionals by implementing common planning time (time allotted for regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers) and involving teachers in decision making. According to Hare and Heap, "These strategies could be particularly attractive to small or rural school districts or low-wealth districts looking for ways to improve teaching

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Finance Center

continued from page 1

"His experience as an advocate for social and economic justice in the fields of public education and civil rights law makes him an ideal leader in our efforts to assure educational equity and adequacy for rural schoolchildren."

Since 1990, Malhoit has served as the Executive Director of the North Carolina Justice and Community Development Center, a statewide multi-issue policy research and advocacy organization focused on economic and legal issues that impact poor and rural communities. During his tenure with the Justice Center, Malhoit led its education reform program, which focused on equity and adequacy in the state school finance system, the racial achievement gap, the needs of Limited-English Proficient (LEP) students, and high stakes testing. From 1974 until 1990, he served as Executive Director of East Central Community Legal Services, a legal aid program serving 100,000 low-income people in a five-county region of North Carolina. ❖

To contact the REFC, call or write: Gregory C. Malhoit, Director, Rural Education Finance Center, 3344 Hillsborough St., Suite 302, Raleigh, NC 27607; phone: 919. 833.4541; e-mail: greg.malhoit@ruraledu.org; website: www.ruraledu.org.

Rural Finance Fact:

Rural schools represented 22 percent of all public schools in the U.S. in 1997, yet they received 12.5 percent of all Federal funding, 14 percent of all state funding, and 11 percent of all local funding. Source: U.S. Department of Education *Digest of Education Statistics, 2000.*

Teacher Recruitment

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without a large investment of new resources."

The report's top-rated strategy for attracting and retaining teachers is restructuring schools to make them smaller. To explain this, the authors cite research showing that smaller schools provide better teaching environments. In their recommendations, the authors write, "Keep schools small. State policy or practice should not force small schools and districts to become bigger. States should help small or rural schools come up with creative ways to address the challenges they face. They should also examine whether funding formulas encourage schools to become bigger."

"Keep schools small. State policy or practice should not force small schools and districts to become bigger. States should help small or rural schools come up with creative ways to address the challenges they face."

Hare and Heap also recommend that states adopt policies "that ensure equal access to high-quality new teacher support." While new teacher support programs have shown to be effective tools for helping new teachers adjust to the demands of teaching and keeping them in the teaching profession, NCREL's report finds that rural and small districts are the least likely to provide a teacher support program. In Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin, rural districts were significantly less likely to have new teacher support programs than were their urban and suburban counterparts. In Michigan, rural districts were more likely than their urban counterparts and less likely than their suburban counterparts to have teacher support programs. It is only in Ohio that rural districts have the most support programs.

Rural districts are also less likely to adopt the strategy of cultivating teachers from the surrounding communities. The "grow your own" approach, where districts provide non-teaching employees, parent volunteers, or other community members with the necessary support to complete a teaching degree, is most prevalent in urban districts. Overall, the poorest districts are the most likely to use this approach.

According to NCREL's report, small and rural districts are also less likely to have common planning time. Only 42 percent of rural districts reported adopting an approach that includes team teaching, interdisciplinary teaching, and common planning time compared to 60 percent of suburban and 62 percent of urban districts.

Although the survey was limited to the Midwestern states, there are lessons to be learned for rural and small schools experiencing teacher shortages throughout the country. Policymakers at every level need to know that small schools attract good teachers. Keeping small schools intact is one of the best and least expensive strategies for recruiting and retaining high quality teachers. Small schools are generally an asset of rural places, but the fact that rural districts are less likely to offer new teacher support programs, use "grow your own" strategies, or incorporate common planning time means that rural districts are not always capitalizing on what they have to offer.

To read more about *Effective Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategies in the Midwest: Who is Making Use of Them*, visit the North Central Regional Education Laboratory website at www.ncrel.org or call 800.356.2735.❖

How are schools in your district recruiting and retaining teachers? Or are they? Let us know what's working – or what isn't – in your school.

Matters Of Fact

Rural South Carolina districts losing funds

Twenty-nine rural South Carolina school districts are facing a loss of funds. The state is trying to recoup more than $556,000 in funds that it overpaid rural districts; the state will deduct the funds from payments to be made in December. For one district, this will mean losing more than $120,000. This announcement comes on the heels of the news that South Carolina school districts are facing a $10.8 million decrease in state funding. The funding decrease is the result of a change in South Carolina's state tax law. Last year, the state increased the tax break for elderly homeowners, which affects the amount of state funds available for schools.

Small Iowa districts short on funds for teacher pay

Iowa's new teacher pay plan is leaving some small and rural districts scrambling to come up with funds. The Legislature-approved plan allocates $31.2 million for teacher salaries. Funds will be allocated to all Iowa schools using a formula based on each school's enrollment and number of teachers. In order to participate, schools must raise beginning teacher salaries by $1,500 per year until the minimum salary of $28,000 is reached. The Iowa State Education Association has said that up to 65 districts will not receive the minimum needed from the state to participate. One small district needs to raise $30,000 to bring teacher pay to the minimum, but will only be receiving $22,000 from the state.

New NAEP scores show rural students in the middle

The recently released 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math scores show that, in general, rural and small town students in all grades score higher than their urban peers, but lower than their suburban peers. Of the rural and small town students, 70 percent of 4th graders, 67 percent of 8th graders, and 65 percent of 12th graders scored at or above the basic level. Twenty-three percent of 4th graders, 26 percent of 8th graders, and 13 percent of 12th graders scored at or above the proficient level. Two percent of 4th graders, 4 percent of 8th graders, and 1 percent of 12th graders scored at the advanced level. For more information or to download a copy of the report, visit www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard or call 202. 502.7344.

Wisconsin looks for ways to reduce taxes that fund schools

In Wisconsin, the "60% solution" is being discussed as a solution to state budget problems. It would mean decreasing state funding for public schools from 66.67 percent to 60 percent. Instead of the state paying the difference, the burden would be shifted to property owners. Yet Wisconsin has "revenue caps" in place that limit the amount of money that districts can raise. Considering that a big part of the state's education funding formula is based on the number of students in a district, this puts small, rural districts in a bind—especially those with declining enrollments. The small, rural districts would have their already smaller slice of state funding decreased, would have to tax local homeowners more, but would be limited in the amount of funds they could raise.

New numbers on rural schools

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has released a statistical analysis report entitled *Overview of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools and Districts: School Year 1999-2000*, which provides national and state-level information about public schools and school districts in the 1999-2000 school year. Data include the numbers and types of schools and local education agencies. Information about the numbers of students receiving services in programs for migrant education, limited English proficiency, and special education is included. According to the report, there were 17,199 rural schools in 1999-2000, accounting for 19.2 percent of all schools, down from 22 percent in 1997. Ten percent of public school students attend schools in rural places of 2500 or less. The report also includes the category "rural urban fringe" which is any place with 2,500 people or less that is within a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). There are 9,978 rural urban fringe schools (11.1 percent of all schools) that enroll 10.7 percent of all public school students. For a copy of the report, visit http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2001339 or call 1-877-4-ED-PUBS. ◆

Overheard Online:

Their world in a school bus

Recently, the Rural Trust's online facilities discussion turned to the topic of busing in rural communities. What follows are excerpts from this discussion.

"A particularly dramatic way to represent 'seat time' on a bus during 12 years of schooling is to equate it with years of seat time in school. I've seen cases where kids were spending the equivalent of two years of school on the bus during their school careers.

"In collecting the views of school of all students in grades four through twelve in a school district abut 15 years ago, Jerry Smith and I learned that kids think of the time they spend on a school bus as being a part of school, and they resent the inefficiency of it."— *Tom Gregory, Indiana University*

"Bus time is school time, and the kids are learning. They are learning how society works, how a pecking order works, how exclusion and humiliation work...I remember things sort of similar from my own childhood on the bus. But when I was a kid every single kid knew every other kid, and their parents knew each other, and the bus driver was Jim Ahearn whose brother drove the milk bulk truck, and he knew us and our parents and our brothers and sisters. I doubt there are many bus

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routes like that anymore, as the essential economy of rural society collapses, and 160 acre dairy farms are consolidated in 2,000 acre operations, and the farm towns wither as the elevators and implement dealers close. Forgive me for giving an obviously Midwestern vision of the rural economy; it's where I'm from.

"My conclusion is that the bus will reflect the community that it is driving through, the same way the houses and landscape are mirrored in the windows. In a cohesive community, the ride may be long, but kids are endlessly adept at amusing themselves. If the kids are restrained by the social fabric of their community, then a bus driver will be able to keep things under control....But if the community is fragmented, then the school bus society will reflect that. Because there is enforced inactivity and no effective supervision, kids will act out their version of how society works, just the way they used to play house when they were little. Except that now their adolescent understanding of society is informed by hip-hop alienation and movie images of materialism, sex, and violence.

"So don't blame the buses, or the people who drive them. They are microcosms of the communities that they drive through. More supervision can suppress the manifestations, but I don't think they can do much to change the basic circumstances. If we make our schools integral parts of our communities, and we make our communities cohesive places where people treat each other with respect, then the buses will take care of themselves."— *Stephen Olson, former school bus driver, current school board member, and ship surveyor in rural Maine*

"Thanks for this reflection Stephen. I especially appreciated the insight that kids act out their vision of society on the bus during 'loose time.' Busing and buses aren't the problem, the way we structure schooling (acting out our adult visions of what society should be!) may be the problem. If there's a solution, it probably lies in changing our (adult) vision of the good society, the good community, or just 'the good.'"— *Craig Howley, Adjunct Professor at Ohio University, Director of ERIC/CRESS at AEL*

Join the discussion! Tell us what you think about busing and facilities in your community. Sign on by sending an email to the facilities coordinator Barbara Lawrence at barbaralawrence@ruraledu.org.

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Rural Policy Matters

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Ohio's DeRolph Decision:

Complex and Controversial

On September 6, 2001 the Ohio Supreme Court ruled for the third time in the *DeRolph* school funding case. It was a 4-3 majority decision. The three concurring and three dissenting opinions indicate how fragmented the court became over the issue.

The complex decision is subject to many interpretations. In general, the Court upheld the constitutionality of the Legislature's response to earlier decisions in this case. However, it said that the amount of funding provided is still inadequate—a controversial issue with varying answers as to the "right" method of calculating adequate funding levels. The decision has undoubtedly kicked up more political dust than it settled.

The lawsuit, filed on behalf of more than 500 school districts by the Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding, has lasted a decade. The latest decision leaves Ohio legislators with the task of finding as much as $1.24 billion more to spend on public schools. The court also instructed the Legislature to implement the parity aid part of the new funding system two years earlier than planned. Parity aid is designed to provide additional funding to poor districts.

According to Deborah Phillips, the Coordinator of the Rural School and Community Organizing (RSCO) Project, a program of Rural Action, in Ohio, "The *DeRolph* case wasn't filed just to get money or to provide interesting legal maneuvers. The *DeRolph* case was about fundamental change to the entire system of funding public education in Ohio to make it fairer. But it has not happened yet."

Phillips points out that in 1997, the Ohio Supreme Court ruled in *DeRolph I* that the state's public school financing scheme "must undergo a complete systematic overhaul;" last year, it ruled that the state's heavy reliance on local property taxes to fund schools makes it "exceedingly difficult" for the state to comply with its own constitution, since "inherent inequities" remain.

Despite those rulings, Phillips maintains that even though there have been no basic structural changes in the funding system, the Court majority in this most recent case accepts the current system as constitutional.

More money, though useful, is a flimsy substitute for equal educational opportunity. Phillips points out that in 1999-2000, Cuyahoga Heights, a wealthy Cleveland suburb, received $16,447 state and local funds per student, while Tri-Valley Local, a low-wealth rural school, received just $4,532 per student. While the new state budget provides parity aid that is supposed to help equalize spending, it is to be phased in over several years and at full funding will only amount to $500 million statewide or about 4.3 percent of the current education spending in the state.

Phillips admits that schools in rural southeastern Ohio and other poor districts will get more money under the new plan the court found constitutional. But the parity aid is supposed to be spent on discretionary items—educational luxuries that only the wealthier districts get

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The Puzzle of Rural Teacher Shortages

A sample of summer headlines told the story: *'Code Red' in Teaching. Principals are Going the Extra Mile to find Job Candidates* (North Carolina). *Schools Face Teacher Crunch* (Vermont).

These reports were common. Prior to schools opening, local newspapers in many states reported anecdotal stories of districts unable to fill teaching vacancies. Though the latest national data is not yet available, there is enough accumulative evidence to document the existence of teacher shortages—in almost every state, in almost every demographic/geographic category (from urban to rural), and in many content/subject areas.

The national attention to teacher shortages has produced both good news and bad news for rural communities.

The good news is, the national focus has induced action on several fronts. Many state Legislatures are examining to what extent their teacher certification policies encourage or discourage new teachers. Researchers are taking a more careful look at issues of supply and demand, alternative certifications, demographics, and the link between student achievement and level of teacher preparation. Teacher recruitment programs are being developed and/or expanded to increase interest in teaching, to offer scholarships and loan subsides, and to help transition people from other professions into teaching. Local districts are widening their recruitment efforts and attempting to make teaching a more attractive option for new candidates.

The bad news is, in spite of all this attention, teacher shortages continue and are projected to increase. It is probable that the situation will get especially bad for rural schools.

This is a complex issue. Areas such as state policies, teacher salaries, job

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DeRolph

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now. She notes that the Trimble Local Schools, perennially one of the two poorest districts in the state, has had to decrease staff because their parity aid can only be used for new programs. "Discretionary items can't replace classroom teachers," Phillips points out.

The Court backpedaled even more on the issue of school facilities. "Under the current plan, it will take 30 years to make all Ohio's school buildings safe, which means that some children entering school this fall may not see repairs to their schools in their entire educational career," said Phillips.

"The DeRolph case was about fundamental change to the entire system of funding public education in Ohio to make it fairer. But it has not happened yet."

The latest decision has been a long time in the making but is unlikely to be the end of the story. Phillips concludes, "What does this decision mean for Ohio's schoolchildren? Some children will continue to receive excellent educational opportunities, and children in rural areas and urban centers will not. There will be improvements, but the system retains its fundamental flaws. The solution will not come from the General Assembly, and it will not come through the courts. As educators and families in a number of states are beginning to realize, positive court decisions do not ensure that the needed changes will be made.

"We can't allow the lack of a positive court decision to stop us from creating an equitable system. The citizens of Ohio must now take up the burden that the General Assembly and the Supreme Court abandoned on the doorsteps of local schools."❖

Teacher shortages

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opportunities for new college graduates, higher education programs in teacher preparation, recruitment strategies, and local working conditions are all areas which cover the problem of teacher shortages. Almost every part and every level of the educational system is part of the problem, and need to be part of the solution.

Just measuring the extent of teacher shortages is tricky. Usually teaching positions are not left open, so actual vacancies are rare. The shortages are probably most evident to superintendents and principals who may find fewer qualified candidates applying for openings. This information is difficult to obtain and researchers resort to other indicators.

Science, math, special education and foreign language are the most common areas of shortages. This is generally true in suburban, urban *and* rural areas. In spite of these national trends, there is a large degree of within-state variability. For example, one state-level survey in Kentucky indicates that in some of the more rural areas, the most severe shortage area is in elementary education, not science and math. Also, the last School and Staffing Survey indicated that rural districts experienced shortages in other areas such as music and agriculture.

A proxy for measuring teaching shortage is the number of emergency certifications issued by state departments of education. Emergency certifications indicate that fully qualified (i.e., appropriately certified) candidates could not be located to fill an opening. State regulations concerning emergency certifications vary. Some states, like Vermont, do not even issue these certifications, though they do grant waivers to districts permitting them to hire non-certified personnel.

There are indications that some states are issuing relatively large numbers of emergency certifications. For example, in 1997, Texas issued almost 8,000 emergency certifications. In Louisiana, one survey indicated that 31 percent of new teachers were unlicensed, with another 15 percent teaching under "substandard" certificates. In 1999, over 10 percent of California teachers were operating with emergency certificates—with the largest numbers teaching in schools with high percentages of low-income students.

Emergency certification rises to significance when combined with the increasing evidence that links student achievement to the degree of teacher preparation. Studies by Linda Darling-Hammond and others, for example, show that states that perform best on the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests have the highest percentage of well-qualified teachers. Conversely, the percent of teachers with emergency certification is a strong predictor of low student performance.

Another complicating issue for rural districts (one that probably inflates some of the data) is the necessity in many small districts for teachers to cover more than one subject area. Though this practice has negative implications for both teachers and students, it is not unusual in small secondary schools. Exit surveys indicate that one common factor in job dissatisfaction is multiple assignments. Thus, this practice may be contributing to a high attrition rate for teachers. Research also shows that low-performing schools tend to have a higher percent of out-of-field teachers.

These trends can be disturbingly significant, especially for rural districts that are experiencing problems finding highly qualified teaching candidates. But, this is not exclusively a pessimistic picture. Some schools, districts and states have implemented strategies that have great potential for reversing the teacher shortage situation for rural districts. Some of these initiatives are already showing good results. Many illustrate rural resourcefulness and creative collaboration.

Future *RPM* articles will highlight these programs, as well as examine other aspects of this issue.❖

Rural Bus Rides:

Study finds it's a long, rough road

The recent start of the school year signals the return to a long, rough road to school for many rural students. According to a new five-state study conducted for the Rural School and Community Trust, rural students often face:

- Bus rides longer than the commonly accepted limit of 30 minutes each way; more than twice that long at one in four schools;
- Rough rides over mountains and unpaved roads;
- Buses lacking communications devices;
- Bus drivers who lack emergency training; and
- Buses that "double route" elementary and secondary students on the same bus, often without adult supervision.

The study, conducted by Dr. Craig Howley, Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, was based on a survey of 696 rural elementary school principals in Arkansas, Georgia, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, and Washington. The states were selected to represent diversity in region, locale, and ethnic composition.

Howley found that school bus rides were worst for children from the poorest communities, where rides of an hour or more each way were 75 percent more frequent, and "double routing" was one-third more common. Rough rides were also the most prevalent in the buses serving the poorest communities, with double the mileage over mountain roads and one-third more mileage over unpaved roads. The study also revealed an unusual racial bias: non-minority students were twice as likely to have bus rides of an hour or more each way, over rougher, more mountainous roads.

The situation was worst in Arkansas, where nine out of 10 elementary schools have longest bus rides lasting at least 30 minutes, and one in three schools have longest rides of an hour or more each way – the suggested upper limit for high-school students. Nine out of 10 Arkansas schools had elementary children riding with high-schoolers. Three in five Arkansas principals said that the length of the bus ride affected parental involvement in their children's education. Arkansas elementary students also faced the roughest rides over unpaved roads and hilly or mountainous territory. One-quarter of Arkansas principals surveyed reported that none of their buses had communications devices.

"It seems thoughtless that adults would so frequently impose long commutes on rural children, when the average commuting time for adult Americans is just 22.4 minutes," says Howley in his introduction to the survey report. "Even in Los Angeles, the land of congested freeways, [the average commute] is only 26.5 minutes. Apparently being rural and poor is sufficient justification to impose long rides on some young children."

The study comes at a time when many rural states are considering further consolidation of schools in order to combat declining enrollment and to lower costs. The report suggests that consolidation will expand the attendance areas of schools and likely lead to even longer bus rides for more rural children. The research provides "additional evidence that consolidation not only does not benefit impoverished rural communities, but, arguably, imposes additional harm," Howley concludes.

Marty Strange, policy director for the Rural School and Community Trust, agrees. "This survey suggests that the length of bus rides is becoming a real issue in many rural communities, especially the poorest communities," he said. "While state and local officials sometimes see this as strictly a 'dollars and cents' issue, it is a lot more than that for the kids. The state can compensate a district for increased transportation costs when consolidation requires more busing. But who can compensate an eight-year-old for time lost from family, from homework, from play? Who can compensate a child for the loss of childhood?"

The full report, *The Rural School Bus Ride in Five States*, can be accessed through the website of the Rural School and Community Trust (www.ruraledu.org) or by going directly to http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~howleyc/howleyc.htm❖

Echoes in the Hallway:

Tears, tunes, and laughter on the standards stage

The Rural Trust has finished production of a short video based on the play, *Echoes in the Hallway*, by the late Joseph P. Hiney. While a drama teacher at Turner Ashby High School in the heart of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, Hiney wrote the play as a response to the growing pressures of testing and standardization. Starring Hiney's original cast, the 30 minute video offers a glimpse into student lives and their impressions of school. It is a show with heart that is useful for opening group discussions of education and youth issues with any audience.

Echoes in the Hallway touches on domestic abuse, teen pregnancy, suicide, discrimination, and school violence. The difficulties and isolation of students' lives are played against a school backdrop of cartoonish teaching drones mechanized by narrow interpretations of standards. Hiney's original songs accent the short vignettes and monologues.

As Hiney wrote in the original program for the show: "*Echoes In The Hallway* serves as a reminder that while standardized test scores and national and state standards are useful in some ways, many students have needs that must be addressed before academic standards can be considered. The stories and reflections in the play are real and come from the direct experiences of the playwright and the actors."

Echoes in the Hallway has been staged before meetings of hundreds of people as an opening act for discussions about standards and testing. While we hope many people will order the video, use it, share it, and have it spark their own ideas, the larger goal is to encourage further productions of the play. Groups will be encouraged to add locally and personally relevant material to the

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Echoes

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core of the show, making it appropriate to the issues facing students in their place.

Annie Mishler, one of the original student actors, recently reflected on what performing the show has meant for her:

"Although I was involved in sports and other fine arts groups, nothing can compare to the experience I had performing *Echoes*. Not only did I learn a lot about defeat and victory, but I learned what it is like to touch peoples lives. Not just make them feel emotions, but to have them change, and make the education system better, if only for one person."

Joe Hiney died in a cycling accident last year, but his students and this show keep his work alive. To order copies of *Echoes in the Hallway*, call the Rural Trust at 202.955.7177. Videos are $15.00 plus shipping and handling. To learn more about the show, visit www.echoesinthehallway.com. ❖

Let us know what you think! We want your reviews of *Echoes in the Hallway*. Send your feedback to john.eckman@ruraledu.org.

New Report Profiles "Smaller, Safer, Saner, Successful Schools"

The National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities (NCEF) and the Center for School Change in Minnesota have produced a new report documenting how 22 rural, suburban and urban schools are trying to make "smallness" work to their benefit. "Smaller, Safer, Saner, Successful Schools," by Joe Nathan and Karen Febey, looks at how small schools are thinking big and bigger schools are thinking small. The report explores innov[illegible]s approaches, s[illegible]ing schools with [illegible]ty services—recreation centers, human services programs, health care, senior centers, counseling—and even housing schools in malls and other traditional business locations. School case studies describe the unique school programs, their educational features, architectural features, and how student learning is impacted when schools are no longer isolated from other community activities.

The 64 page color report is available on the web at NCEF, http://www.edfacilities.org/ir/ncefpubs/saneschools.pdf (requires Adobe Acrobat Reader software), or call to order a $10 printed copy of the report, 888.552.0624.

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Rural Policy Matters

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North Carolina's School Finance Case—A Victory for At-Risk Students

But Is More Money Needed?

In 1994, five low-wealth and predominately rural school districts, as well as parents and students filed suit against the State of North Carolina (the Leandro Case) alleging that children in these districts were being denied their constitutional right to an education. The plaintiffs identified inadequacies in facilities, technology, and teacher salaries as some of the problems resulting in lower student achievement. They faulted the state school finance system for creating an unequal and inadequate education in poor and predominantly rural counties by relying on local property taxes to supplement state funding for necessary expenses.

After the lawsuit was filed, six urban/high-wealth school districts intervened in the case claiming that the current system of funding was also unconstitutional because it does not address the disproportionate number of students in their districts who need extra resources and services because of poverty, language barriers and handicaps.

In 1997, the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled that under the state constitution's education clause, students have a fundamental right to receive a "sound basic education." The court defined a "sound basic education" as one that will provide the student with at least:

- Sufficient ability to read, write, and speak the English language, and a sufficient knowledge of fundamental mathematics and physical science to enable the student to function in a complex and rapidly changing society;
- Sufficient fundamental knowledge of geography, history, and basic economic and political systems to enable the student to make informed choices with regard to issues that affect the student personally or affect the student's community, state, and nation;
- Sufficient academic and vocational skills to enable the student to successfully engage in post-secondary education or vocational training; and
- Sufficient academic and vocational skills to enable the student to compete on an equal basis with others in further formal education or gainful employment in contemporary society.

The high court sent the case to a trial court to determine whether or not the current funding system was, in fact, providing all students with a sound basic education. Beginning in the fall of 2000, North Carolina Superior Court Judge Howard Manning, Jr., issued a series of rulings in the case.

First, the Court analyzed separate components of the North Carolina educational delivery system and determined that, as a system, it was sound, valid and constitutional. The Court also found that students who perform at a "proficient level" (Level III) or above on state tests are obtaining a sound basic education.

Second, the Court analyzed the educational needs of at-risk children, and determined that in order for at-risk children to have equal access to a sound basic education, the State

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Kids Can

Grady County Student Action

The football team at Cairo High School in Georgia, the Cairo Syrupmakers, is wrapping up its 2001 season. The student council, which meets on the fourth Tuesday of each month, has successfully completed this year's homecoming activities. The editors of the *Raconteur* are collecting photos and stories for the next year-book. At first glance, student activities at Cairo High School seem to be those of any high school. This is a story about how one group of students organized to make their student activity anything but normal.

Last year, the annual homecoming parade was missing something—a large portion of the band. Many African-American members of the Cairo Syrupmaker Band, known as the "pride of Dixie," were protesting unfair treatment and a demand that they play Confederate music. The parade boycott was part of an organizing strategy that the students used to send the message that they would no longer stand for intolerance.

Band members had asked that they not be required to play Confederate music and that they be able to play upbeat music in the stands during football games. As a compromise, they said they would agree to play what the band director asked during competitions and out on the field. Their request was denied. The students decided that something had to be done to make themselves heard. To do that, they used silence.

At the next football game, the band walked on to the field at half-time, but the drum section did not play. Their silent protest earned two of the drummers a dismissal from the band. Despite the fact that the entire drum section had participated, only the two

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School Finance

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should provide quality pre-kindergarten programs for all at-risk children. The court did not specifically define the term "at-risk student," but noted that such students generally come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or are members of minority groups.

In part three of its decision, the Court used a low-wealth rural school system (Hoke County) as a "test district" to determine whether children are receiving a sound basic education. If not, is it because of lack of sufficient funding or for some other reason? The Court examined Hoke student performance on state tests and compared this performance with other school systems in the state. This comparison showed that at-risk students failed to achieve a sound basic education statewide, as well as in Hoke County; it also found that the low performance of at-risk students was similar regardless of the wealth and resources of the school system attended.

Moreover, the Court determined that at-risk children in North Carolina can achieve at high levels, but are not obtaining a sound basic education under the current system. Citing five schools that had high achievement levels for "at-risk" students, the Court indicated that it was not convinced that a lack of financial resources was the primary problem, but that a lack of a coordinated, effective educational strategy for at-risk children statewide was a major factor. The Court directed school systems and the State to develop a plan that would first put in place pro-grams that provide all children with the equal opportunity to obtain a sound basic education. The Court noted that if funding from other sources is being used for other educational purposes than to meet the constitutional requirement, then those funds must be reallocated to satisfy the constitution.

In May 2001, the trial judge issued a fourth ruling, setting aside the part of the Court's third ruling that required the state and school systems to develop a plan to strategically direct resources towards providing all students, including at-risk students, with a sound basic education. Instead, in October 2001, the court conducted further hearings to determine the "critical question as to whether or not the failure of at-risk children to obtain a sound basic education is based on lack of funding or lack of implementation of ... successful, cost-effective programs." A ruling is expected in early 2002.

Similar to other school finance cases across the nation, the North Carolina court decision has spurred on action by both the state Legislature and the governor. In May 2001, North Carolina's governor formed a blue ribbon task force (the Education First Task Force) to consider how to provide and fund a "superior and competitive education." The Task Force will make its recommendations to the governor early in 2002.

The State Legislature and the State Department of Public Instruction have also formed special commissions to address school funding as it relates to at-risk students. The court decisions have also had an impact on the state budget. Despite a budget crisis, the legislature recently appropriated millions of dollars to create a pre-school program for four year olds, new funding for Limited-English Proficient students and several special initiatives to help at risk students.

There are lessons to be learned from North Carolina's school finance experience. First, although courts play an important role in the effort to obtain equitable and adequate funding for rural schools, ultimately state legislatures and governors will make the final school finance decisions in the that arena. Advocates for rural schools must always be poised to act in the political arena even as court action is proceeding. Second, because school finance decisions will be made in the political process, rural school advocates will need to become better organized locally and statewide as a political force if they are to make a difference. Finally, rural education advocates will need to be able to demon-strate why rural schools need additional resources in order to ensure that every rural child has an equal opportunity to receive a high quality education.◆

"Because school finance decisions will be made in the political process, rural school advocates need to become better organized locally and statewide as a political force if they are to make a difference."

McClain High School Renovation Wins National Award

On October 18, 2001, The National Trust for Historic Preservation gave its prestigious National Preservation Honor Award to Triad Architects, of Columbus Ohio for its sensitive and innovative restoration of the Edward Lee McClain High School in rural Greenfield, Ohio. (See *RPM* December 1999). Richard Moe, president of the National Trust said, "The restoration of McClain High School brought back a community landmark while providing students with a first-class, high-tech learning environment. Thanks to the hard work of its supporters, the project not only saved the building, it also encouraged the state to alter its policies regarding historic schools. The project is truly a model for schools across the nation."

Built in 1915 with funds donated by Greenfield resident Edward Lee McClain and his wife, the school boasts Tiffany lamps and chandeliers, Greek statuary, and more than 165 works of art including large murals. Fine woodwork, vaulting ceilings, gracious hallways and entrances, and a rooftop garden, all inspired people to cherish the school. However, an unsympathetic renovation in the mid-20th century as well as 85 years of use had disguised

some of its beauty. Working very closely with the community, Triad Architects planned a restoration that brought back the original design and richness of the décor and met the need the community had expressed for space for public events. Using inventive strategies Triad updated electrical systems and brought Internet access to classrooms.

Superintendent of Greenfield Exempted Village School, Phil Cornett, stated, "In an era of the 'throwaway society,' our community felt strongly that it was important to teach pride and respect to the district's young people. What better way to do so than to use our school buildings as a visual link between our cultural heritage and hope for future generations? Our buildings are more than just shelter from the elements. They are an eternal teaching tool in their own right that instills a sense of duty and ownership."❖

Successful Strategies: Attracting teachers with child care incentives

In response to a recent RPM article about teacher recruitment and retention strategies, Sharon Thurman, Associate Superintendent of Clay County Schools in Hayesville, North Carolina wrote us to share a strategy that is working for schools in her district. "Recruitment is definitely a problem for small, rural schools," Thurman writes. "To combat this problem our system initiated an on-campus daycare for employees' children." The following is an excerpt from an article that Thurman wrote for the North Carolina Association of School Administrators' *NCASA Leadership* magazine.

"Clay County Schools, located in the Southern Appalachians of Western North Carolina, along the Georgia state line...and one county removed from Tennessee, has found an effective way to challenge those wealthier districts. Central Office staff knew that they would be unable to offer financial incentives. They also knew that 27 percent of their faculty had 25 or more years of experience and were approaching retirement. The need for new teachers, already apparent, was likely to become even more serious in the next few years. What, they asked themselves, would address the concerns of young teachers? And, given that, which of those concerns could be undertaken by a small school system?

"...The Central Office staff found that the private business sector had a growing history of providing childcare as a fringe benefit. It was a proven recruitment and retention tool, often improved company loyalty, boosted employee morale, and reduced absenteeism. The district's central school campus already housed an inclusive preschool program, an after-school program, and a summer discovery program.They shared space in an older school building with the district's main-tenance department, several exploratory classes–like music and art–as well as space with the Family Resource Center. With a little room rearrangement, some new paint, and minimum renovation, the Clay County schools opened its first employee childcare center in the 1998-99 academic year."

According to Thurman, "The daycare gives credibility to the idea that the Clay County School System values employees and children. It is a great example of schools being for children and families." As one teacher with a child in the daycare program said, "This extra support is a real motivator to do your best as an employee and give back to Clay County Schools."❖

Matters of Fact

Resources for young activists

Idealist.org, a project of Action Without Borders, has launched a website geared towards young people who want to get involved in their communities or want to organize around an important issue. The website includes profiles of organizations started by kids, listings of volunteer opportunities for people under 18, information on resources for starting community projects, and links to a variety of nonprofit sites for kids. For more information, visit http://www.idealist.org/kt.

Rural education in Idaho

The Idaho Statesman recently ran a series of special reports on rural Idaho, one of which focused on rural schools. The education report highlights some of the difficulties facing rural schools. Among them, the facts that 68 percent of rural school districts exceed the state average in the number of low-income students and that rural districts have lost five percent of their student population in the past five years as families move to cities for better opportunities. The full series is available at http://www.idahostatesman.com/news/ruralidaho/06index.shtml.

Small schools in Baltimore

In a nod to the effectiveness of small schools, leaders of the Baltimore public school system have announced a plan to restructure their high schools by building new schools and reorganizing existing schools with the goal of creating smaller schools. The chief of schools wants to redesign the system so that high schools will have an average of 400 students instead of the current enrollments of 2,000 students.The plan will cost $55 million over five years, with funding coming from increased state aid, business partnerships, and foundations.

Overview of public schools and districts

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has released a report entitled *Overview of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools and Districts: School Year 1999-2000.* The report provides national and state-level information about public schools and school districts in the 1999-2000 school year. According to the NCES, in 1999-2000, one in ten U.S. public school students attended school in rural areas that were not on the fringe of urban areas. For more information, visit http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/overview/#4 or call 202.502.7396.❖

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Kids Can

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African-American drummers were dismissed.

According to Erica Jackson, a community organizer for the Southwest Georgia Project for Equality and Excellence in Education, "This sent a mob of parents into the band room. This mob resulted in one of the students being reinstated that night. The student who remained expelled from the band was not reinstated because he was considered to be the leader. However, with the help of our parent group he was reinstated on the following Monday."

Still, the damage had been done and the students were not satisfied. After boycotting the homecoming parade, band members encouraged parent involvement by asking them to pass out flyers in the stands during the homecoming game. The flyers asked those in favor of fair treatment of the band to signify so by raising one pant leg when the band members went out on the field. "The response," says Erica Jackson, "was tremendous."

Members of the parent group followed up with a town meeting at one of the local churches. With many students in attendance, a number of other issues surfaced. For example, the band was required to play for Mule Day but was denied the right to play for the Martin Luther King Jr.Day parade. Participation in Mule Day counted as a grade. In fact, the band director was taking off points from their grade for not participating. The students and parents decided that they needed to push for a written policy concerning the music that the band would play and the types of events they would attend. Developing the policy would be a process that involved the band director, students, and community members.

Since these events unfolded, the school has unofficially granted the group's wishes. The group, however, is scheduled to ask the school board for a written policy, to re-estimate the p[illegible] a plan —especially now [illegible] school students who walk to the beat of a different drummer.❖

Pass it on! Tell us what's working in your school and community. Write to us at policy.program@ruraledu.org.

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RPM 3.11

Rural Policy Matters

December 2001 — Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action — www.ruraledu.org

Building Community Leaders in West Virginia

Cindy Miller knows the value of community. Growing up in Hacker Valley, West Virginia, Miller rode the bus close to 90 minutes each way to high school. She graduated at the top of her class and went on to be a Dean's list student in college. Now married with two children, Miller is back in Hacker Valley because she wants her children to experience the same close community connection that she had. As a fellow with the Challenge West Virginia Fellowship Program, Miller is furthering her interest in community by working to give the schools in West Virginia the benefit of community connection, as well.

"I believe the only way for us to change things in West Virginia is to change the laws that allow or force consolidation upon communities as the only means of obtaining state dollars for renovation and construction of school facilities," says Miller.

Miller is just one of the 16 fellows working in 10 counties spread across the state and representing the diverse geographic and economic mix of West Virginia. The fellowship program is designed to engage local people with leadership potential in community organizing. Fellows meet monthly to discuss issues, share information, and plan strategies. They are responsible for organizing their local communities to form county chapters of Challenge West Virginia. A small monthly stipend helps to cover expenses for participation.

Linda Martin, the co-director of Challenge West Virginia, writes, "While we understand the concept of global citizenship, we believe it is on the place where we stand on the earth that true citizenship begins... It is in that place, where people act in the world, that people develop a sense of belonging and understanding that their actions do contribute to the quality of life being lived by all who inhabit that particular place and the entire globe." It is this philosophy that guides the fellowship program's goal of affecting change in state-level education policies by training local leaders and building a movement at the grassroots level.

For Miller, this means fighting for community-based schools. "I believe our work is important because community-based schools promote responsible adult citizenships," she said. "County-wide schools are simply too far away from most children's communities to build any sense of civic responsibility. No one knows what riding a bus over an hour each way for four years – not to mention eight years, from the ages of ten to eighteen – does to children and their families unless they have been there and done that. And, too many of the ones who were there and did that just want to forget about it as quickly as possible."

In her own community of Hacker Valley, Miller has been involved in the struggle to keep the local school operating as the school board tries to close it down. The board was doing no upkeep on the building and the roof was leaking. In response, the community came together, bought the materials and put a new roof on themselves. The community has since come together again to ask the school board for $25,000 to build a new school with the agreement that the community will raise the remaining $250,000 to make it happen.

When asked about what she's learned from the fellowship program, Miller replies, "The most valuable

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Words of Wisdom: Rural Education Working Group Meets

At a recent meeting of the Rural Education Working Group, 84 people representing 14 groups and 12 states came together in Atlanta, Georgia to discuss the work of organizing around rural education issues. Participants shared stories and strategies for maximizing the impact of their organizing efforts in a number of workshops. During a panel discussion on organizing, Johnnie Johnson, the Executive Director of the Drew Community Voter's League in Drew, Mississippi, shared the following thoughts on her approach to organizing:

"We have to ask ourselves 'Why do we do this work?' The question is sometimes difficult to answer, because when we ask ourselves 'Why?' we have to ask ourselves 'How?' We then come to understand that what we're doing is organizing. We are bringing together unity and unifying groups of parents, students, and community people who share a common vision, working from a collective strategy and programming work.

"We have made a conscious choice to put community interests over self-interest and when we do that, we are saying 'I have to decide within myself...to help bring about a change to empower.'

"We teach our community when we go through the training process that empowering or empowerment is about having information, knowledge, and understanding. Having those things makes you feel like you can walk on water...because we come to these trainings or come to organizing work, most of us, from a disadvantaged place. The reason we have the existing kind of culture and policies is because we did not know that we had rights. And along with those rights there were duties and responsibilities. Not just for ourselves, but for those people we worked to put in office. [...]

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Fellowship Program

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thing is that community people can and need to be educated to the fact that they do have a voice, not only locally, but also at the state level when it comes to the education of their children and grandchildren."

Thanks to the Challenge West Virginia Fellowship Program, Miller and others are doing their part to make those voices heard.❖

(For more information about Challenge West Virginia and their Fellowship Program, visit www.wvcovenanthouse.org/challengewv)

REWG

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"That helps us understand how and why we need to keep on training and stay in the trenches around work so that we can continue to stay as knowledgeable as those people that we are putting at the table to make decisions, and so that we can continue to be able to come to the table to participate in those decisions. [...]

"We keep reinforcing to our own selves that we live in a world with other people. No matter if you live to be 100 years-old, there's going to be someone living with you. That means that the decisions and choices that you make not only affect you, but they'll affect somebody else. So if you're climbing and all the world around you is standing still, it's still going to affect you.

"Where I come from, I can get enough knowledge and enough degrees to be making $150,000 a year, but if there's poverty going on and people are stealing, they're not only going to steal from the poor, they're going to steal from the rich, too. So it benefits all of us that, as we climb and as we participate in conversations, that *everybody* have the opportunity to participate in conversations. That we come to the table with the understanding that no matter what your color is, no matter what your class is, no matter what your educational background is, that you're worth something. And when we start seeing ourselves and each other that way, then we can understand why we do organizing."❖

Big Support for Small Schools? Ask the Public Agenda Foundation

The Public Agenda Foundation, a Washington, D.C. based public interest group, recently reported results of a survey on the perceptions of students, parents and teachers about small high schools. The report is simultaneously encouraging and perplexing.

The results indicate that most people perceive very significant advantages to small over large high schools. A large majority of respondents felt that small schools (less than 500 students) offer advantages over large schools (over 1,000 students) such as small class size, teachers who take a personal interest in students, a strong sense of belonging and community among students, a low dropout rate, strong parental involvement, effective help for struggling students, fewer cliques, less alienation, less bullying and harassment, less drug abuse. Larger schools, on the other hand, are felt to offer more racial and ethnic diversity, and a wider variety of courses.

What's confusing is that in spite of these very strong sentiments, Public Agenda's news release about the survey emphasizes other perceptions that tend to downplay the strong public support for small schools. A few questions asked about community reaction to breaking up larger schools and perceptions about most promising practices for improving high schools in general. Based on answers to these questions (some of which were not publicly released, but sent to RPM when we asked) Public Agenda concluded that most people think small schools are "appealing", but not "at the top of their agenda for education reform."

We are baffled. The results seem to show very strong public support for small schools. Public Agenda says the survey is still being analyzed and should be released in December. In the meantime, maybe we can help.

It seems to us that Public Agenda is looking at a bowl of cherries and can't see anything but the pits. It says the survey shows that just a third of parents say they have given "a lot of thought" to reducing school size to improve a school's quality. But their survey shows that 32 percent gave high school size " a lot of thought" and another 39 percent gave it "some thought." Thus, 71 percent of respondents gave schools size more than a "very little thought" or "no thought at all," the other two choices they could have selected. We think that is impressive.

We also wonder to what extent the rural perspective was represented. For example, though parents were asked how communities would react to breaking up large schools, we saw no questions about how people would react to closing small schools. That is more likely to be a rural concern. It is hard to believe that rural people, whose schools are generally smaller than urban schools, would rank breaking up big schools as very important. As rural people, we continuously struggle against forces that wish to close down our small, community schools.

Public appreciation and acceptance of small schools is strong. We believe the Public Agenda survey documents this, and we hope that will be the conclusion when the full report is released.❖

Public Agenda's report on small schools is scheduled to be released in December 2001. For more information on the report, contact Leslie Darden or Michael Gottlieb at Public Agenda, 212.686.6610. To view the press release and data tables, visit www.publicagenda.org and click on Press Room and select "Teachers, Parents Find Smaller Schools Appealing, but See Other Education Reforms As More Pressing." Then let us know what you think – send your reactions to policy.program@ruraledu.org.

Lessons Learned from Ohio's Litigation Efforts

Editorial Comment

The recent school finance ruling by the Ohio Supreme Court was surely a disappointment for the Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy, the organization that brought the case to the Court, and also for school finance reform advocates in Ohio and around the country. In a decision clearly based on political compromise, the court may have, for now, dampened the dream of fundamental and comprehensive school finance reform that would deliver equal educational opportunity for all Ohio's children, irrespective of where they live or their socio-economic status. Of course, the Ohio Coalition, Rural Action, Inc., and others who care deeply about equal educational opportunity will have something to say about that. Even the final word of the courts doesn't last forever in a democracy.

However, disappointment in the specifics of the ruling should not overshadow the important contribution the case made to improving education in Ohio. Nor should it dissuade school reform advocates from pursuing litigation to achieve the goal of equal educational opportunity for low income and rural children. In fact, the work of the Ohio Coalition and its attorneys is a model for other organizations seeking school reform through litigation to emulate.

One of the most impressive things the Ohio Coalition did was turn what began as a rural initiative into a broad-based coalition of urban and rural school districts, all united to support fundamental reform in schools funding. By doing this, the Ohio Coalition became an organization that had the financial ability to fund the litigation, retain expert legal counsel with the capacity to wage legal war with the state, and mount an effective media and communications campaign.

In Nebraska, where a school funding case was brought a number of years ago, the plaintiff learned the hard way that without a cohesive, well-funded coalition of school districts, committed for the long-term, litigating a school finance case is problematic. The case was the effort of an individual plaintiff, who attempted to put together mainly non-school interest groups to support the case. The effort was hampered from the beginning by a lack of funds—to litigate the case and to organize and to conduct a public education campaign.

Certainly there are examples of successfully litigated cases with little or no financial support from the school district. Vermont is an example. And, while there is no one recipe for success, a lesson from Ohio is that school districts can be critically important allies. As rural interests in Nebraska now prepare to take another look at achieving school finance reform through litigation, they would be wise to look to the experience in Ohio and other states for guidance as to how to successfully wage the campaign, notwithstanding the disappointment of the recent ruling.

In doing that, advocates will need to consider that successful school finance reform requires a broad array of allied groups working in concert over a sustained period of time in both the courts and state legislatures. School districts are key allies to help fund and organize the litigation. But, community groups, non-profit child advocacy organizations, parents and students are also essential allies to support litigation and to help carry the day in the legislature. Without such a broad base of support, both courts and legislatures will be reluctant to order or implement sweeping education reforms that children need and deserve. Thus, as advocates continue to fight for equal educational opportunity, foundations and others supporting school finance reform will need to commit financial resources to develop and sustain broad-based coalitions dedicated to improving funding for public education.

The Rural Trust perceives that generating broad-based community support can be the turning point that produces results in both legal and political realms. With this hope in mind, the Rural Trust recently made a grant to Citizens for the Educational Advancement of Alaska's Children (CEEAC), a school district organization, to start building grassroots and community support for a school facilities finance reform remedy. CEAAC obtained a ruling in the district court that Alaska's current system of funding school facilities in rural areas is unconstitutional. The hope is that through community and public engagement the group will build the support it needs to win the funding battle in the legislature. Time will only tell, but it may turn out to be a model for winning both in the courts and in the legislature. In any event, for rural school advocates, keep your eye on Alaska.

As this issue goes to press, the battle for school finance reform still wages, as the Ohio Supreme Court has ordered the parties to mediation, with the possibility of further rulings should they fail to reach a settlement.♦

—Tyler Sutton, Consulting Attorney, Rural Trust Policy Program

Matters of Fact

Georgia budget cuts could hurt rural schools

In the face of an economic downturn, the Georgia Department of Education is looking for ways to cut its budget. The leading option is to eliminate the field service director program, in which state employees act as liaisons between state education officials and local school superintendents. Such a change would be a direct blow to the rural and small school systems that rely on this program to answer questions about new state policy, budget requirements and other state procedures. With no central offices and high administrative turnovers rates, small and rural school systems are especially in need of the field service program

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Matters of Fact

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resource. Also included in the budget cut proposal is a cut in after-school programs funding.

New report looks at E-Rate

"Great Expectations: The E-Rate at Five" is a new report that discusses the latest models and policies that could maximize the impact of the E-rate on educational technology. Since its inception in the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the E-rate has provided $10 billion in resources for schools. The report, published by the Benton Foundation and the Center for Children and Technology, makes several recommendations for improving the E-rate program, including: lifting the funding cap from the current level of $2.5 billion; providing outreach and assistance to schools in low-income communities; and investigating ways to improve program administration. For a copy of the report, visit www.benton.org or call 202.638.5770.

New data on dropout rates

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has released an updated report in its series on dropout rates and high school completion. *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000* presents data on rates for 2000 and examines time series data from 1972 through 2000. The key finding is that, while dropout rates have improved since the 1970s and 80s, the rates have remained stable since 1987. According to the report, five out of every 100 young adults enrolled in high school in October 1999 left school before October 2000 without completing the high school program. Students in families with the lowest 20 percent of family incomes are six times more likely than their peers from families with incomes in the top 20 percent to drop out of high school. The report can be found at http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2002114◆

More on small schools

Education Week recently ran an article on small schools. The article "Research: Smaller is Better" appeared in the November 28th issue and examines the apparent disconnect between what the research on small schools is saying and the size of public schools. The article reports that, although more and more research is indicating the value of small schools, American schools continue to get bigger. According to the U.S. Department of Education nearly 44 percent of all public elementary and secondary students attend schools of 750 students or more. Among high schools, enrollments of 1,000 or more are common in at least seven states. To read the article and view a table on related research, visit http://www.edweek.org/ew/newstory.cfm?slug=13small.h21.◆

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